

ALBERT A. THIBAUT, JR.

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: To begin, when and where were you born?

THIBAUT: I was born in Boston, Massachusetts on August 5, 1941.

Q: Well, let's get a little on the family. On your father's side, what do you know about them?

THIBAUT: On my father's side they are of French Canadian background, in Quebec since the mid-17th century. My grandfather came to the United States in the late 1880's, moving south, not too far from where he grew up, into Maine and then finally going to Lawrence, Massachusetts where he set up a very successful photography business in the early years of the twentieth century. My grandmother on my father's side was also from Quebec. My father was born in 1909, and in 1931 graduated from Boston College where he majored in French literature. He spent a number of years in France in the 1930's as an English teacher and as a graduate student at the Sorbonne, also studying French literature, where he received his "License", a French degree. These years were a fascinating time for him, as each summer he traveled widely as a guide, observing first-hand Mussolini's Italy and Nazism in Germany. In France he also met my mother, whose name was Mary Marshall, from New York City, and who was studying French in Paris at the time. Her family had been in New York for several generations, having originally come from Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century. They left France at the advice of the American Embassy on September 1, 1939. It was a good time to get out. They sailed from Cherbourg and were married in 1940. My father enrolled at Harvard for further graduate work, which is why I was born in Boston, and then later taught at the Tilton School, a prep school in New Hampshire. During World War II he was a civilian employee of the Army coordinating logistics at the Port of Boston. Because he spoke several languages, he also interviewed enemy prisoners of war. In 1945, we moved to Bliss, Idaho, where Dad was superintendent of schools and my mother taught math and science.

Q: Had your mother gone to college?



THIBAULT: Yes, she was a graduate of St. Joseph's College for Women in Brooklyn, New York, and from there then went to Catholic University here in Washington for her masters degree in French. And that's what prompted her then to go to France in order to perfect her speaking, which is how she met my father. After returning to the U.S., and prior to her marriage, she taught at St. Mary's College in South Bend, Indiana, the women's college for Notre Dame University. But in 1945 they headed out to Idaho. As I said, my father was superintendent of schools there, in a potato growing town in southern Idaho and they stayed there for a couple of years, but Dad always wanted to teach at the college level. When an offer came from the University of Connecticut we moved to Storrs, Connecticut. Then when I was seven we moved to Quebec City, Canada, where he taught at Laval University, which is a French language university in Quebec City. It was sort of carrying coals to Newcastle: to bring an American to teach French literature in Quebec City. But for me, in retrospect, it was great. I didn't know any French before that, but I went to school in French from the age of seven through the age of eleven. I received a very solid grounding in French grammar, composition, and the fundamentals of the language which have stood me in very good stead to this day. I am totally bilingual.

Q: So, anyway, it wasn't a predominant influence.

THIBAULT: I grew up in a very Francophile environment, but my parents focused on France, which they resumed visiting as early as 1950 or '51 and then traveled to almost every year starting in the late 1950's. The first language I learned actually was French. My mother spoke as fluently as my father. When we moved to Idaho I completely forgot it. They don't speak much French out there. So it's hard for me to judge, it's so long ago. And I'm not sure what Quebecois influence is, 'til we actually went to Quebec.

Q: You were there from what year to what year?

THIBAULT: In Quebec City? Let's see. From 1949 to 1954, I guess.

Q: Were you considered an American at the school? Were you sort of tagged as the American?



THIBAULT: Oh, yes, in part because of the school I attended. It wasn't merely the school, although I remember arriving not knowing much French at all and then later being congratulated for rapid proficiency. They had an annual school event, something called distribution des prix, the distribution of prizes, at the end of the first year, when I was in the third grade. I received a special prize for my proficiency in French. But it was playing in the street, more than anything else, with other kids who never let me forget that I was American. We always spoke English at home so that we wouldn't forget our English. Oh, yes, I was very well aware. And my parents and all my relatives were Americans, and we would visit them in New York regularly. So we were very aware of our American nationality. In fact, that was significant ultimately in my decision to apply for the Foreign Service.

Q: How about the Catholic Church? How did that play in your family?

THIBAULT: Well, we were and are Catholic. It was a very strong influence. My father is still living, he's 95. My mother died many years ago. So it was a very formative influence in my upbringing, is the way I would put it.

Q: When you were in Quebec, Quebec City, did you feel the pressure of the church or the influence of the church there, because the church had been so influential in Quebec?

THIBAULT: Well, there was influence. Pressure is too strong a term. And it was a different age, a different era, in those days but its influence was very strong, very pervasive, as I look back. I emphasize that I was quite young at the time. But the school I attended was a religious school, run by an order of nuns and later, for a year, I attended a school administered by an order of brothers. Had we remained in Quebec City, I would have gone to a high school called the Petit Seminaire, which is in fact the oldest school in North America, dating from the 1630's. So yes, I mean it certainly reinforced the influence I received at home.

Q: How'd you find, how'd you take to school life there?

THIBAULT: Well, my parents were both educators. They placed enormous influence on schooling, both of them. So you were expected to accept school as the thing to do and they set high standards. I just find that a hard question to answer.

Q: Do you have brothers and sisters?

THIBAULT: I have five brothers and sisters.



Q: Wow! Where did you rank?

THIBAULT: I was the first.

Q: You were in charge.

THIBAULT: I wouldn't say that, but I was the first.

Q: Other than French, which obviously you took to, any other subjects of particular influence?

THIBAULT: Well, from my earliest learning how to read, history has always been a passion of mine and from then until now archaeology and ancient history, in particular, remain subjects of great appeal to me. So history, certainly. I read very few novels or literature unless it was part of the assigned reading, but I always read history.

Q: Obviously you were very young to be an activist, but did you get any feel about the Quebec lib̄ĩġ1⁄2rĩġ1⁄2 or that sort of thing?

THIBAULT: I was certainly exposed to a very strong sense of Quebec identity. As I said, history was a particular favorite subject and the history taught there in elementary school was very much the history of New France and of Quebec province. So I certainly was exposed to that but in terms of the political sphere or what became the Quebec Liberation Front of the 1970's or the separatist politics of the Eighties, Nineties and even of today, no, I was not.

Q: Was the school separated by sex?

THIBAULT: I went to two schools. Both were separated by gender. Girls were in one wing and boys were in another at the first school. And certainly the second one was a boys' school, run by brothers.

Q: How much at home did the world around you, events of the world beyond what your parents were doing, was that a subject of conversation at all?



THIBAULT: Again, this was up to the age of, we left when I was eleven, the summer I turned twelve, I guess, from eleven to twelve. I would say, given their background, my parents were very internationally minded. Their horizons were assuredly beyond Quebec province. We were Americans so we were very conscious of what was going on. I can recall the Korean War and discussions we would have about that. But at that stage I can't say we sat around the table discussing world events.

Q: You left there at the age of eleven. Where did you go?

THIBAULT: We then moved, still in Canada, to Windsor, Ontario, which is an automotive manufacturing city directly across from Detroit. The two cities are separated by the Detroit River. My father was a professor of Modern Languages at the University of Windsor, teaching French and Spanish language and literature. He had received his doctorat es lettres, from Laval University, that is, a Ph.D. In Windsor, I immediately entered high school, at the age of twelve, because the system in Quebec was organized differently from what we are familiar with, in the sense, at that time, that elementary and secondary school were each for six years. I understand it has changed considerably since then. For those slated for higher education in Quebec and with high aspirations, you followed what was called the classical course, with a heavy emphasis on Greek and Latin and so forth, that was six years instead of four. I had taken the entrance exams for this next stage, had been admitted, and then we moved to Windsor. My parents felt that I had finished elementary school, and that I well might as well go into high school, even if I was a couple of years younger than my classmates.

Q: Windsor must have been a completely different environment. This was a suburb of Detroit.

THIBAULT: Oh, well, different countries, but the industry is very tightly linked, that's right.

Q: And it was within the Anglo sphere.

THIBAULT: Right, it was very much an English speaking, exclusively English speaking, environment but as I said, we had always spoken English at home, so speaking, reading, writing was not an issue. But in Canada your ethnic background becomes - I don't know if you know anything about Canada, but at least at that time and my guess is that it hasn't changed much - that one's ethnic origins are a subject of comment and noted. And so you have that awareness. So anyway, I was there through high school and I also attended the local university, in all from '54 through '62.



Q: You mentioned that your ethnic background is something. Coming from Quebec, did you find that this was an advantage, disadvantage in Windsor?

THIBAUT: No, Windsor, like Detroit, is an old French settlement dating from the 18th century and so there are many people there having a French background. They don't speak French but they have French names. So there was nothing unique about it. I'm simply saying that at that time in Canada, far more than in the United States, if you were Ukrainian or Irish or whatever, you were this or you were that, that people seemed to identify themselves and others in those terms. They always commented about that.

Q: I think we, I've heard again and again, they talk about fostering and making ...

THIBAUT: A mosaic, rather than a melting pot. That's the Canadian slogan.

Q: I've heard that story again and again. They work at it.

THIBAUT: They do and their history is different, having the concept of "two founding races." So from the very beginning, the French element in Quebec, which is in many ways the core of Canada, in historical terms, resisted assimilation into an Anglophone model. If you start with that reality and have a constitutional setup that recognizes and protects it, then certainly from that flow the distinctions that people make about each other.

Q: Getting your education in a foreign country, did you find that, you've always been interested in history. Was the history you learned when you later came back to the States, were there significant gaps or divergences between what you learned?

THIBAUT: No, I wouldn't say that. There was a heavy dose of American history in the curriculum that I took, both in high school and in college. We lived right next door to Detroit. My mother taught French and Spanish in the public schools of Detroit; she commuted back and forth. She was fifteen minutes away from her school. It's just a river. It's like Arlington and the District. And of course there is TV. - the Canadians complain that they're saturated with American television. We watched all US news broadcasts and all the popular shows of the period. I very distinctly recall watching the Army-McCarthy hearings at length. Moreover, we were Americans to begin with and had no intention of remaining in Canada. Of six siblings, only one has remained in Canada and she's the only one who was born there. So, no, to answer your question, I didn't feel at a disadvantage. Many of the textbooks were American, the subject matter, many of the teachers were American.



Q: What about, so you went to Windsor College?

THIBAULT: It's called the University of Windsor, yes.

Q: And you went there the full four years?

THIBAULT: In Canada they have what they call an honors program beyond the regular BA course work. At that time, you added an additional year. It was a five year program. I took that. Now that was a period that was very formative for me. I very well remember the year that I graduated from high school, the summer I graduated. I was looking at the university catalogue and they had the different majors listed and then they had a page there, which I thought and still think was an excellent idea, listing possible career opportunities if you majored in these subjects. I was interested in history and the catalogue mentioned Foreign Service, among many others. That immediately lit a bulb and from that time on, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I had a goal.

Q: Had you had any connection or knowledge of the American Foreign Service?

THIBAULT: Well, as it happened, Windsor had a U.S. consulate. In fact, someone who became very well known in the Foreign Service was a young consular officer there, Ambassador Nick Platt, and he was a student of my father's, brushing up on his French and I probably didn't have more than one or two conversations with him. But that encounter gave concrete form to the career concept that had gelled with me. I knew I was interested in foreign languages, I was interested in economics, in politics, in history. I knew there was an exam process. So the subjects I figured would prepare me best for the Foreign Service exam were the very subjects of interest to me. It seemed like a natural fit. In addition, there was my parents' encouragement. However odd such a career might seem to my contemporaries, it was taken as perfectly natural at home, given their own wide travel which, I should add, continued in high school, even at Christmas or Easter, when we would drive all the way from Detroit to various points in Mexico. During the summer, in most years, they took student groups to Europe, bringing the family with them. I usually stayed home, foolishly I suppose, preferring to get a summer job. Passports, embassies and consulates were far from alien to me.

Q: Were you able to get hold of any autobiographies or biographies of American diplomats?



THIBAULT: I could have. I took one or two courses in American diplomatic history in college, but I didn't seek them out. As I told you, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. That was a great advantage to me in that everything fell into place. Because my goal was the very specific one of taking the exam, each subject in college was assessed in terms of whether it would be useful to me or not in qualifying. I was under no illusions about the challenge of competing against people who had what I regarded as more prestigious or more favorable educational backgrounds.

Q: As you were doing this, were you concerned that when you appeared before a group of examiners, American examiners, would say, "Well, you've spent most of your time in Canada. You may be of American parentage but you've been brought up in a Canadian atmosphere." Was that a concern?

THIBAULT: It was a concern, not a pressing concern but I certainly thought about it. But I figured the way to deal with that was to go to graduate school in the U.S., which was what I did.

Q: Where did you go?

THIBAULT: Well, first I went from the University of Windsor, graduating in 1962, to the University of Toronto. I had a very nice scholarship from the Government of Ontario so I thought I might as well take it. I got my masters degree at the University of Toronto in '63. From there I received a fellowship to go in the fall to Philadelphia, to the University of Pennsylvania, to a PhD program in international relations.

Q: So, at Toronto, this is for your masters? What was your area?

THIBAULT: Again, it was history, an M.A. in history.

Q: Any particular

THIBAULT: Oh, it was a combination of courses and then of course a major paper. The paper was on Anglo-American relations and the Indians in the late 18th century.

Q: When you talk about Indians, what Indians?



THIBAULT: Red Indians, Native Americans. Growing up around the Detroit area, where there had been several Indian uprisings which are very much a part of local history. Chiefs Pontiac and Tecumseh. In fact, a suburb of Windsor is a little town called Tecumseh, Ontario. So in that whole area, there was great rivalry between the US and Britain to secure the support or neutrality of potentially hostile tribes. The Great Lakes area, on both sides of the border, is dotted with fortifications that date from that period. There was a lot of tension between the newly independent United States and the British forces in Canada. So I did a paper on that subject.

Q: Then you're off to the University of Pennsylvania. This is for a PhD? Did you finish it?

THIBAULT: I came close but I did not finish it.

Q: What were you concentrating on when you were doing it? What were you working on?

THIBAULT: Well, again, my goal there was ... you very rightly put your finger on it a moment ago. How am I, a graduate of an obscure Canadian university going to be competitive in taking the Foreign Service exam? So that's what encouraged me to enroll in the international relations program, as opposed to political science. I took a medley of courses in my first year, 1963-64. Unbeknownst to me before I went to Penn, the university is one of the premier institutions in the world in the field of South Asian studies. The first chair of Sanskrit in the United States, way back in the mid-19th century, was established at Penn and that heritage remains strong to this day. My point in mentioning this is that there was a whole coterie of professors, whether of sociology or history or political science or languages or economics, whose personal specialties, one way or another, involved the Subcontinent. I became fascinated by the region and very much enjoyed the courses that I took, and began reading extensively about it. So that became an area of specialization and the area in which I wanted to do my dissertation research, as well.



In the meantime, I decided that I might as well take the Foreign Service exam. That was my career objective and people had told me, "Take it as many times as you wish. No harm in going through the exercise and seeing how you fare." So I guess it was in 1965 that I took the Foreign Service exam, maybe it was '66. To my utter astonishment, I passed, including the orals, on my first attempt. That still left me with a dilemma, because here I was in the middle of a PhD program in which I had invested a lot of personal interest and time. After being informed months later that I had cleared the security and medical hurdles, and was invited to join a new Foreign Service class, I asked the Department for an extension, there's a term for it. In the end I got two of them. In 1967, I received a fellowship to study in India itself, having selected a topic to work on and went off to India, to the Indian School of International Studies in New Delhi. In the meantime I'd become engaged, having met my fiancée at Penn where she was also a graduate student. When in India it became clear that finishing the research, writing up and defending the dissertation would take longer than I had realized. I told myself: I know what I want to do, I've been accepted into the Foreign Service, they've given me two extensions. How many more can I count on? I'd better fish or cut bait. So I wrote back to the Board of Examiners that I wished to be considered for the next class which would be formed about 12 months later. There was one class a year at that time. My fiancée, Caroline Whaley, came out to India and we were married in Delhi in July '68 with the U.S. Consul as a witness. We returned to Philadelphia in January of '69, and then in July of '69 I entered the Foreign Service.

Q: You recall any of the questions you had on the oral exam? Did you get the feeling they were trying to look at how American you were?

THIBAULT: No. I never had that sense. My Canadian background, to be candid with you, never arises. I rarely think about it. It's so long ago, it's never been an issue with anyone, whether in graduate school, certainly not in the Foreign Service. It's more a matter of curiosity than anything else. I never felt at any disadvantage from having it. If anything it was an advantage.

Q: Well, I mean, sometimes, I've served on the Board of Examiners

THIBAULT: As I have.

Q: I was there at the time when you could sort of craft your own questions. And it would be something I'd be taking a look at, just to get a feel, are we getting somebody who's really not well plugged in to the country he's supposed to be working for.



THIBAULT: Well, it may be that questions were slanted in that direction to me. I didn't get a sense of that but I can't exclude the possibility that those questions were there and that I was obviously able to answer them. Who's to say what was in their minds.

Q: What was the background of your wife?

THIBAULT: She's of South Carolina background, although she grew up in New Jersey. In fact, her grandfather was a Confederate soldier. Can't be many people living today whose grandparents were that. Her family is from the Charleston area. Her father was an engineer and refinery manager for what then called Standard Oil, now Exxon, outside New York City. The family lived in Westfield, New Jersey. She graduated from Chatham College, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and then from there went to Penn, for graduate work in American history. That's how we happened to meet. She later taught at Temple University.

Q: Where did you go in India?

THIBAULT: At that time?

Q: I'm talking about when you were in grad school.

THIBAULT: I went to New Delhi. My dissertation topic was on the role of All India Radio in political development. Back in the Sixties, the concept of political development was a major source of interest in theoretical elaboration for political scientists and my supervisors at Penn were very much caught up in that. But the focus on All India Radio was good, because I could do the research in English but at the same time it was national in scope as opposed to being very parochial and very regional. And it raised a lot of interesting issues about national and regional identities, cultural policy, political influence on radio broadcasts, these being the pre-television days. They were still very much under the influence of those, even dating back to the Thirties, who considered radio as a major molder of public opinion, as a major tool that could influence rural people. It was subsequently proven not be to the case but at that time there was a lot of faith in that. So it was an interesting topic and I traveled widely to conduct interviews.

Q: This was a government, sort of BBC type



THIBAULT: Yeah, in fact set up by the BBC in the colonial period but called All India Radio. It still exists. So that was in New Delhi. In order to qualify for an Indian visa, I had to be affiliated with an Indian educational institution. Again, one of my supervisors had had longstanding relationships. He wrote to one of his friends at the Indian School of International Studies and they sponsored me for the educational visa and all of that had to happen. But once I was there, I was pretty much on my own. I could conduct my interviews, go to the archives, travel around the country, all of which I did.

Q: This was your first real taste of India. How did you find it?

THIBAULT: Oh, I enjoyed it immensely. I took to the country. The spell has never left me. It still remains, as one can see, looking at my career path. So I enjoyed the people, I enjoyed the intellectual challenge of dealing with India. It was a very positive experience. Fortunately, my wife felt the same way. As I say, we were married there. I had written to her, "In the Foreign Service, we'll be living abroad. Here's an opportunity to come out and live and experience, see how you like it before we make a final commitment to at least the Third World in the Foreign Service." Which she did and was, as I say, very positive as well about the country.

Q: When you came in, when did you come in?

THIBAULT: This was June '69.

Q: By the way, when you were in India, did you run across sort of anti-American involvement in Vietnam, was that a factor, or were you sort of

THIBAULT: No, I can't say that it was a factor. I was there when both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were shot. The shock of these events was very profound, especially regarding Dr. King who had been influenced by Gandhi and thus had an intellectual link with India of which the Indians were very aware. But I didn't feel any anti-American sentiment at a personal level. The newspapers at that time and broad Indian policy statements were often very critical of the U.S., but it never translated into any personal animosity or distance. Far from it.

Q: You started in '69. How would you characterize your basic officer, your A-100 course?



THIBAULT: Well, this was at the time of the Vietnam War. I should mention, by the way, in connection with that, that I was A-1 for my draft board throughout. For some reason they never called me. I never applied for a student deferment. I mention this only because the intake for the class was divided between 50 per cent who came in under what you might call normal auspices, as I was, and 50 per cent whose acceptance into the Foreign Service was conditional on accepting their first assignment to Vietnam in the CORDS program. CORDS was an acronym for ... you served in South Vietnam.

Q: Yes, but I wasn't in CORDS.

THIBAULT: It was a combined civilian military reconstruction and development program. You'd be assigned to individual provinces at district headquarters. There'd be a military officer and a foreign service officer and you would work closely with the local Vietnamese administration, as a liaison with US military and civilian assistance authorities, and keep tabs on the Viet Cong, presumably. Several officers were killed in that program. Anyway, 50 per cent of us came in under those auspices and then 50 per cent of us in the more normal way. So did you have any other aspects of this in mind when you asked the question?

Q: No, I was just wondering.

THIBAULT: There were women in the class and a couple of African-Americans, but we were overwhelmingly white males. It was a geographically diverse group, I mean from all over the country.

I should also note that, unlike today's system, I came in already coned, that is, I came in as a political officer, in the POL cone. All of us came in already coned. Also unlike today when every new officer's first assignment is as a consular officer, only those coned for consular work went out to do consular work. The result is that while over the years I developed detailed knowledge of consular operations, I never had a consular tour. I'm a great believer in that first tour being consular, regardless of whether you move to other work, because it exposes you to a key aspect of Foreign Service work.

Q: Did they give you much, I mean did you feel you could go where you wanted or did you feel that you be picked up to go to Vietnam?



THIBAULT: Well, as I said, 50 per cent of us were going to Vietnam. So, implicitly 50 per cent were not. As I recall, there was a sheet on which you could express your preferences. In my case, at some point during the A-100 program, the coordinator, a fellow by the name of John Day, asked, "How many here speak French?" He explained that the officer paneled for Conakry had resigned suddenly in protest of Administration policy on Vietnam forcing the personnel system to reach into the incoming class for a successor. Now we had not yet been tested on our language skills. Three or four of us raised their hands. He said, "Ambassador McIlvaine would like to meet with you tomorrow," referring to Ambassador Robinson McIlvaine, who was ambassador to Guinea. We were to meet with him, in what was, I guess the old FSI buildings, in Arlington the next day but that fell through. And John Day says, "The ambassador couldn't make it but he would still like to meet with you, only requesting that you meet at his home." And he lived over in Northwest, somewhere. So, a day or two later, the three or four of us who said we spoke French filed through his home, which was empty except for some orange crates. He sat on one and I on the other and we spoke in French for about 20 minutes and the next day I was informed that I had been selected to go to Guinea. I knew nothing about Guinea or Africa but at that point in one's career and at that stage in life one doesn't argue much. You are so excited by the prospect of going overseas. I don't know how long the training course is today, but I came in mid-June '69, and by mid-September I was in Conakry, with my wife. So that was the beginning of our Foreign Service life.

Q: What was the situation in Guinea at the time you got there in '69?



THIBAUT: Let me start by saying that, in many ways, Guinea was the most memorable of my assignments, of all of the assignments I've had. It certainly left vivid memories. Very briefly, Guinea was a West African country which had been a former French colony. By political conviction and certainly to create, as he put it, "the New Guinean Man," and the "New African Man," President Ahmed Sekou Toure had established a socialist Guinea, creating all the infrastructure of a Third World socialist economy and political order and society, to the extent that he could influence social attitudes. The Party was everything, meaning the PDG, the Parti Democratique de Guinée, it was called, the Democratic Party of Guinea. The Soviets had enormous influence, a huge embassy, as did the Chinese who were their rivals. The Chinese had built the People's Palace in Conakry, a large, very modern convention hall, which they staffed, because the Guineans didn't have the technical expertise to maintain it. The East Germans ran the security and intelligence services and were also very influential. So, needless to say, the Western countries, including the United States, had cool relations with Guinea. The number one whipping boy were the French, their former colonial masters. Guinea had been the only colony in French West Africa that had, in 1958, spurned post-independence association with France, a decision by Sekou (as everyone called him) that infuriated De Gaulle. The French departed abruptly, supposedly removing even the light bulbs as they exited. But, in addition, the regime also had a phobia about NATO, especially the FRG, no doubt reflecting East German inputs. So, West Germany, the United States, and France were constantly being sort of pilloried in the country's one paper, l'Horoya.

That was the setting in which we arrived in September 1969. We did not have an ambassador at that time. In fact, we had a succession of chargés from the West Africa desk who would come out of the Department for six or seven weeks, rotate in and out. McIlvaine had left. I don't know where he went. He may have gone to Kenya, but he had left. So actually I never did serve under him. Then we had a fellow by the name of Bob Melone, who I believe later became ambassador to Rwanda, who was chargé for quite a time, six months or so, but again brought in from the desk. And then finally an ambassador arrived in the person of Albert W. Sherer, Bud Sherer, a terrific guy, previously ambassador in Togo, but more relevant to Guinea, he was an East European hand who had been DCM in Prague and political counselor in Warsaw and was a navy guy from World War II. He had seen and experienced Stalinist regimes close up for many years. We had a very small staff. I was the reporting officer. I was econ, political and AID affairs officer. I was what they called an FSO-7, a very junior guy. The country team could easily have fitted around a table not much bigger than this one.

Q: We're talking about a table about the size of a door.



THIBAULT: Not very large, that's for sure. Yeah, about the size of a door. The embassy was located in an old auto showroom. Guinea had been quite prosperous in French days and Conakry had a gloss about it which had very much faded by the time ten years had rolled around, after independence. We had a big plate glass window downstairs where USIS was located. Upstairs was the executive suite and some of the cubbyhole offices where we worked. So that was the American Embassy.

Q: You were there, what, two years?

THIBAULT: A little over two years, from September '69 to December '71.

Q: Was the United States, I mean this was the height of our involvement in Vietnam. Were we castigated by this all the time? Was this part of the motif there?

THIBAULT: Well, imperialism was a constant refrain. The North Vietnamese had a large embassy present. They would often be brought out to a huge stadium that, I don't know if the Chinese or whomever had built it, where they would be hailed as the poster boys of the victims of imperialism. The atmosphere was incredible. The stadium was packed. You had what my wife came to call the "Guinea cheer." You would have the president, Si<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>kou Touri<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>, in his flowing white robes, often flanked by his cohort, Kwame Nkrumah, who had been kicked out of Ghana. They would circle about the stadium in an open Mercedes. Following the President's lead, shouting into a microphone - "l'imperialisme" - , the crowd would chant "a bas , "down with". The President: le colonialisme; the crowd - "abas". President - "le neo-colonialisme"; crowd - "abas". We must have attended two to three dozens of such events at the stadium, to which the diplomatic corps would be summoned with rarely more than a day's notice, often just hours, as announced over the "Voice of the Revolution." Like Fidel, Sekou could go on for hours, seeking to whip up the "militants", or party faithful who were supposed to be the entire population, fully mobilized behind the Revolution.

Q: As a reporting officer, were you able to get out and around much?



THIBAULT: My time in Guinea was very much divided into two phases. The first year, until November 1970, you could travel about the country. We were under tight observation and you had to have permission from the government in order to leave the capital but people were relatively open. Africans are very friendly. I spoke fluent French, so I had no problem in communicating. We reported extensively on our interactions with the government and on events that we thought were of interest to the Department. I am more cynical today of just how much attention Washington paid to Guinea at the time, but I took it very seriously. We had also a reporting list that was tasked from Washington and there was only one reporting officer. So I reported on United Nations programs, for example. AID had closed its mission and I had to monitor and report on our residual programs, primarily PL 480. I also did economic reporting; for example, there were bauxite mines, in which there was some U.S. investment. And I handled the commercial work as well. And to the extent that Washington had any interest in political reporting I did that as well. Mainly what the president was saying, his pronouncements and how this fitted into West African regional politics and the like. I was extremely busy.

Q: What about the rest of the diplomatic corps? Was this a sort of cohesive little group? I'm talking about the Westerners there.

THIBAULT: Yes, there were not many but we were all on friendly terms. The other "large" Western embassy were the Germans, West Germans that is, mainly because they were there as a counter to the East Germans. As a result of that, they ran several aid programs and a large technical school as well, so they had some people there. The French, of course, were not present. There were no relations between France and Guinea. There were three or four Italians, the Japanese, the Indians, Pakistanis, and a handful of other countries. There were surprisingly few African diplomats, mainly because Sekou was at odds with all the "collaborators" who had become associated with the French. We all knew each other well. Again, I was very junior. I was a Third Secretary, but it didn't prevent me from hobnobbing with ambassadors and more senior people in the dip corps.

Q; Was there a general feeling that Guinea was on a downward spiral because of the socialist influence?



THIBAULT: That was very clear. You saw no growth that was occurring. As I said earlier, Guinea had been a relatively prosperous place before independence. There was a large, I wouldn't call them French although they had French nationality, Lebanese community. Throughout West Africa many of your trader community were Lebanese and there were still a large number of them left in Guinea. But there had been far more, plus French and other nationalities, before independence. And they had left the infrastructure of a very nice colonial city but you could see the decay and the projects that had come to a sudden halt and the fact that only Soviet- and Chinese- funded projects existed. And most of these were showcases for the party and Sekou, such as the People's Palace and the stadium. Roads were abominable; there was no investment in the country. So you certainly saw economic decline and stagnation.

Q: How about you and your wife? Were you able to make contact with the people? Or with sort of an East German influence, was that available?

THIBAULT: No, my wife taught at the small American school which covered a number of grades. She was one of three American teachers. The director was an African-American woman who had been in Guinea for a number of years. Through her, she was able to meet Guineans. As I said earlier, they were very friendly. I can't say that we had a very large circle of Guinean acquaintances or friends, outside of the government, because there were constraints there. But we were able, certainly, to develop relationships, yes.

Q: Well, this was, I think I'm right, a period where many American blacks were going after their roots, or not?

THIBAULT: Well, you had some, but not so much going after their roots. I mean, the Roots TV series was after this. But you had so-called American revolutionaries. Stokely Carmichael was in residence, African nationalists, if you will. He was the most prominent of them in Guinea but there only a handful. Stokely was a great buddy of our Bill Davis, our PAO, who himself was African-American. Bill was an extremely effective officer. He had a very wide selection of Guinean friends and buddies and Stokely would come to his house. As I said earlier, this experience was clearly divided between pre-November 21, 1970 and post-November 21, 1970.

Q: All right, let's talk about November 21, 1970. What happened?



THIBAULT: On the morning of that day, which was the day after eid al-fitr, the end of Ramadan, the ambassador got up. He always got up early. His house was on the Corniche, or seaside road. Conakry is like a big finger, a narrow peninsula that juts into the sea. His house was on the water, a few yards from a small beach. He thought he saw activity on the horizon. Being an old navy man, he went out and got his binoculars, looked again, now spotting a flotilla of warships far out at sea. And then to his astonishment they began launching boats like Boston Whalers which, as he watched, landed on the coast, some of them not too far from the ambassador's residence. That was the beginning of an attempt by the Portuguese, who were in neighboring Portuguese Guinea (now Guinea-Bissau), to overthrow the Touré government. The reason for their hostility was that the headquarters for the liberation movement for Portuguese Guinea was located in Conakry and they had an enclave there. So they would maintain contact with their people, being directed by their leader, Amilcar Cabral, who was a very charismatic personality. Cabral was recognized not just as leader of the PAIGC, the name of their party, but even in Pan-African terms as one of the great African liberation leaders. The Portuguese then were under military rule. So they launched this expedition to be rid of the PAIGC once and for all .

I should tell you that we had one policy guidance from Washington, and I recall being told this by the desk before I left Washington, to keep our contacts with the PAIGC to the lowest possible profile. They didn't say not to have any contacts at all, but to keep them at the very lowest profile, because at that time, Portugal being a NATO country, we were in negotiations with them for the renewal of our facilities in the Azores. They did not want to do anything to upset the Portuguese. So for the Americans to go hobnobbing in any visible sense with the PAIGC was not something that Lisbon, or Washington, would welcome. The country team, in concert with the desk agreed that I, being the most junior person and a Third Secretary, was disposable or, I should say, deniable. These were very carefully calibrated and calculated forays and I'd meet Cabral and his subordinates on the diplomatic cocktail circuit, because PAIGC representatives would be invited by others. So I would chat with them, making sure that others were present. Not surprisingly, they would always invite me to meet with them at their camp outside the city. So in careful coordination with the Africa Bureau, I was allowed to do that once or twice but it was a very sensitive subject.



So to resume, on November 21, the Portuguese fanned out. In fact, to my knowledge, they were overwhelmingly African troops. They began seizing strong points and the fighting raged all day. I had left to drive overland for the first time to Liberia a few days earlier. As it happened, I was returning from Monrovia and entering Guinea that very day. I stopped at the border of Liberia and Guinea at about two o'clock in the afternoon. The crossing point was in the bush with nothing in sight but there was a border post and the road. While looking at my passport and visa, the Guinean border official exclaimed, "Oh, it's two o'clock. I must turn on the news from Conakry," referring to the regular two o'clock news broadcast. And immediately he did that, I could hear the Voice of the Revolution describing how "our brave troops are fighting the Portuguese, the imperialist invaders. The President of the Republic is at the head of the valiant resisters. We are certainly going to drive them into the sea." Very inflammatory, very highly charged language. So the border fellow, while very distraught and upset by the news, nevertheless allowed me to enter Guinean territory. I hadn't gone more than about ten kilometers after picking up my Embassy driver, who had been waiting because the Liberians wouldn't allow Guineans into their country, when we rounded a bend and immediately were surrounded by guys with their weapons drawn, all pointed at me.

It was a police post. I was immediately asked for my papers which I showed them. I said, "I'm a diplomat. You have no right to examine the car." They said, "Monsieur, we're at war! We have to search you and we're going to detain you." To add further insult to injury, from their point of view, they looked through my wallet and they came across a calling card from a person I'd called on in Monrovia. And he said, "Ha! You've been in touch with the Portuguese!" I said, "What do you mean?" "It says right here! General Tire! Military man!" I said, "No, that's the name of a company." General Tire! Tire in French also means to shoot. So I was really in the soup. I was brought under heavy escort to the provincial governor, who was himself rallying the militants, as they called them, the Party faithful, who were a sort of paramilitary force. Well, one of the reasons for my trip upcountry had been to call on the new ambassador to Washington, who happened to be this governor. We had had a very good conversation on my way into Liberia. So on my way out of Liberia they bring me to see him. We fell into each other's arms and then he brought me up to speed on what was going on in Conakry. I was held there for about three days, at a hotel, with a World Bank guy. The ambassador managed to get a message out to me, saying my wife was okay and they were working with the government to have me flown to Conakry. So finally, I did fly back to Conakry.

What had happened was, as I say, the Portuguese had used some of their African troops, who were abandoned on the beaches by Portuguese officers, their white officers who returned to their ships. Presumably to add legitimacy to the enterprise, the Portuguese gave it the cover of being a Guinean exiles' force that had attacked and was seizing the town and was to overthrow the Toure regime, but they weren't numerous enough, not strong enough, not well organized enough, whatever. So the Guineans beat them back and finally pushed them back to the sea, where many of them had fled. A lot were just shot in the water and a number of them were taken prisoner. That's when the domestic purge began.



The president's view was the Portuguese would never have dared to attack the bastion of African liberation, as he called Guinea, unless they could count on a "fifth column" in the country, consisting of counter-revolutionaries, traitors, spies and their collaborators. How would you know if someone was a collaborator? Well, prime suspects were those who had had a substantive connection with the French in the past, and there were a lot of former military people who had served in the French army and, of course, many civil servants, teachers, professionals, and businessmen. There was a whole class of people who, under the French regime, had been part of that system. The huge purge that immediately followed the aborted invasion rivaled the Thirties in Russia in its atmospherics and organization and that's how we reported it to Washington. Day in and day out for months you would have confessions on the radio: a monotone voice in which people identified themselves and then described, in very elaborate terms, their involvement in the complot, in the plot, and their collaboration with the Portuguese. In fact, you'd recognize the voices of people you knew. I myself was mentioned a number of times because I had traveled upcountry and stopped and called on people. Here was an American NATO spy who, just before the Portuguese attack, had obviously been coordinating their responses on the eve of the attack. It all fell into place. It was also very sad. I can well recall one morning driving into the embassy and seeing the bodies of a number of people dangling from an overpass. And what's worse, they had brought buses of schoolchildren and the families of those who had been executed, who were on the road looking up, watching the bodies sway gently, while singing revolutionary songs and shouting slogans in support of the president. We would visit cemeteries to count new mounds in order to judge the death toll of the purge.

Amazingly, in spite of my alleged involvement, as publicly reprinted in Horoya, I was not told to leave, the Ambassador was not called in, I continued my normal activities with government officials. For the remainder of my time in Conakry, another 12-13 months after the attack, the atmosphere was totally charged with the purge, which went on week after week, month after month of bitter denunciation of the West and particularly of the Germans, the West Germans. Again, we didn't bear the full brunt of it but the West Germans did and again I'm sure their East German cousins were behind that. Many non-official foreigners were expelled. Any foreigner married to a Guinean who had been arrested, usually a wife, was expelled with the children "to be raised by the Party." It was a very vivid experience, a very personal experience for me and my wife.

Q: What about the American sort of revolutionaries, Stokely Carmichael?



THIBAULT: Well, they started packing pistols on their hip and wearing berets mimicking Che Guevara in order to display their identification with Sekou and the revolution. To give you a flavor of the regime, when the telephone would ring, a Guinean wouldn't answer "Hello"; rather, you replied "Committed to the revolution:" "Prêt pour la révolution." As a Guinean, you assumed your phone line was monitored and you took no chances by being less than ardent in your zeal. The revolutionary rhetoric was everywhere. As I say, we at the embassy were not directly on the receiving end of the Guinean vituperation and of the media attacks, or at least far less so than were the Germans. One reason being that, a day or two before the attack itself the German foreign minister ...

Q: Genscher?

THIBAULT: Yes, Genscher had visited Lisbon. That was proof positive that the Nazis in Bonn were giving orders to their acolytes in Lisbon and, of course, the East Germans were feeding this. Technicians at the German school, the German funded school that I mentioned, which was a technical school, doing excellent work, were all arrested. Ironically, many of the so-called Nazis were Israeli citizens who were working under contract for the NGO that operated the technical school. It took a long time before they were released. It was sort of like the aftershock from an earthquake. There were incidents that would flare up unexpectedly, months after the failed attack. One of them involved a bauxite mine that was owned by Aluminum Company of Canada, Alcan, and Alcoa of the US, a fifty-fifty venture. Roughly half the staff were Canadians and half were Americans, meaning the expat technicians, maybe about 15 or 20 of them working on a little island off the tip of Conakry, where there are bauxite deposits. We got word that they had all been arrested and were being brought to court. The ambassador immediately sent me down to the courthouse to find out what was going on. I reached the prison like enclosure, getting there just in time to see the truck pull out. They dropped the tailgate and the prisoners walked off the back of the truck onto the top step of the courthouse and immediately were brought into the courtroom. There was a judge sitting at a tribunal. The proceedings lasted about ten minutes at most, in which, without ever making a statement, they were all found guilty of antirevolutionary activities and marched out to get back on the truck, with sentencing to be announced later. At that very moment, a man came running in with a piece of paper, shouting at the top of his lungs, saying, "Wait! Wait! Wait! The president has given them an amnesty!" While he had sent me to observe, our ambassador, Bud Sherer, had gone to the presidential palace saying all hell would break out in Washington if these people weren't released immediately and that had had some effect. So they were returned to the small boat, went back to the island, and by that afternoon they were at their jobs as if nothing had happened. It was just a surreal atmosphere.



The ambassador had good access to the top leaders. Many of the people around the president, as is often the case, were much more reasonable to deal with. We had a special relationship with the foreign minister, who before this had happened, before the Portuguese attack, had been sent to either Bethesda Naval or Walter Reed on some medical issue. I can't recall what it was. That was something we used to do in those days, I don't know if we still do it. We would sometimes arrange for local dignitaries in Third World countries, where they had inadequate medical facilities, to have them sent to one of our military facilities. They always were very grateful for that. But there was follow-up treatment and the RMO, the State Department's regional medical officer for West Africa was stationed in Conakry, because it had the worst medical facilities of any of the countries in the region. So it was logical to place the RMO there. We had an acting RMO who was the personal physician of Wilbur Hayes, I don't know if you remember, the congressman ...

Q: Oh, yeah, he was the one was caught, went into the pool

THIBAULT: The Reflecting Pool

Q: With Fanne Foxe, who had a very large bust size

THIBAULT: She was a foxy lady! Well, this doctor from the same home town as the congressman was his great and good buddy and, I don't know why, but he often would spend a little time in an embassy in Africa, filling in for an RMO who was on vacation. He volunteered for that. Actually, he was a very decent guy and a good physician. In Conakry, he provided follow-up medication and monitoring to the Minister, invariably accompanied by a pique ...

Q: Injections.

THIBAULT: Injections. The Africans absolutely believed that the pique was essential to sound medicine. So the ambassador instructed me, "Al, you go with him." The doctor didn't speak any French. "Go with him and try to pump him of any information. Try and steer the conversation." We'd work up talking points on issues for me to raise with the minister while he was bending over, baring his rump for the pique. There was Thibault, trying to pump him of information! What a place!



Anyway, this atmosphere of terror continued for the remainder of my tour there. The security measures that were then put in place were notched up, ratcheted up to an incredible degree. You would have checkpoints on major roads every 200 or 300 yards and these young kids at night, armed with AK 47's in Party uniforms and armbands would stop you as you were coming home from someplace. They would see you stopped down the road, at one checkpoint, and yet would stop you at another. They weren't asking for money. It wasn't a shakedown. They just wanted to see your papers. We soon learned that those from "brotherly countries" always seemed to be waved through. The Russians, the Chinese, the Algerians, you name it and they always were "people's democracies." So I soon learned that they would ask me, "Who are you? Show your papers." I would say, "I'm from the People's Democratic American Republic." (It sounds even more impressive in French!) "Thank you!" You'd be waved right through. As I told my colleagues, "We're popular, elected by the people, democratic, a republic. The People's Democratic American Republic, why not?" Better that than to have one of these kids loose on the trigger or something.

So we would be following this unfolding process, comparing notes. In the embassy itself, we had radio duty, because Horoya was only published once a week and it was just a rag. Yet, the president was constantly to be heard on the radio. All information, most announcements and summons to the People's Palace for chiefs of mission, were all conveyed via the Voix de la Revolution, by radio. You had to be tuned all the time, especially at night. So we would assign our team, our staff, those who spoke French, to radio duty. It was scheduled, assigned duty and you'd report back to the country team the following morning. So the nine o'clock news would come on, and then go on forever. The president was like Fidel. What was worse is that he or his ministers would first speak in French for a time, and then their remarks would be translated into one or two local languages, after which the French broadcast would resume. So it could go on at great length. Very often I would set up a tape recorder, like this one. We had a servant, whom I told, "Michel, it's your job to turn this on at nine o'clock." I would have to come home at eleven or twelve, or whenever, and with pen and paper listen to this a couple of hours, taking notes to see if there was any nugget worth reporting to the country team the next day. What a place!



What was interesting too, a reflection of very different times compared to today, is that security was a post responsibility. You didn't have a regional security officer on the Embassy roster, you didn't have an RSO. I don't think the position existed; it certainly didn't exist in Conakry. To the extent that security issues arose, you were asked to apply common sense without much specific guidance. Washington was very relaxed about this. When the Portuguese attacked and there was much shooting all over the place, we were all at home. I was out of town but everybody else was at home. My wife and I shared a house with the CDC's measles/smallpox program officer and his wife, a duplex. They all sought refuge in an interior room without any walls. When I came home the ground was littered with brightly shining copper shells. The Guineans had been shooting wildly seaward, in case the Portuguese decided to land on our side of the corniche. Having served many years later in Saudi Arabia and in India, when security was a big issue, let me tell you the reaction, the institutional reaction, was very different thirty years ago from what it is today. Nobody was called home, no evacuation of dependents, no sending out of teams, no security review, no accountability review boards, no Mylar for windows, no moving to a secure location, and of course no concern then with an attack on a diplomatic facility and no concern then with suicide or other car bombs, or with any of the threats that are felt so immediately today. I mean it was a very different world then.

Q: Well, was there ever any consideration of getting Americans out of there, the embassy?

THIBAULT: No, and we had all our dependents with us. It never occurred to anyone.

Q: I would have thought that, here you have an economy in a downward spiral anyway and if Touré is going after all those with essentially foreign connections, foreign training, he's just gutting the ability of the country to work.



THIBAULT: Right, I agree. That's exactly what happened and in fact what that resulted over time in was a tremendous exodus of Guineans to neighboring countries, particularly to the Ivory Coast. When we were there, when I was there, I mean if there was one paradise on earth, it was Cote d'Ivoire, the Ivory Coast and particularly Abidjan. And of course the president's great target, in terms of his own personal vituperation on the radio, was Houphouet-Boigny, the president of Ivory Coast, whom he would denounce vociferously. Now they had all known each other and worked very closely with each other in pre-independence days. And Houphouet led the movement by all of the French colonies, with the exception of Guinea, to remain in economic alliance with France. At that time, they had a West African franc which was tied to the French franc, so it was considered a hard currency. Of course, Houphouet had the famous wager with Nkrumah: Ghana became independent in '57, Ivory Coast in '58, who in ten years would have progressed the most in economic terms, each following different paths? I think within six months it was clear who was going to win that one, and it wasn't Nkrumah in Ghana. So Ivory Coast acted as a magnet, as did, to a lesser extent, Senegal, where Senghor was the president. And again, Senghor was one of these, in Touré's language, one of these collaborators and "running dogs" of the French. The fact that the French sort of bolstered their economy, subsidized it to a large extent, to a point where the standard of living there was much higher than in Guinea, attracting all of these Guineans, just was rubbing salt into the wound, as far as Touré was concerned. Or Siékou, I should say as everybody called him Siékou.

Q: Did we have any aid programs when you were there?

THIBAULT: Not really, no. In fact, that's why my title was political, economic and AID affairs officer. The AID program had been closed down before my arrival. We had one TCN, third country national, a Greek fellow, and I was the officer supervising him. He was maintaining the individual program accounts. That is, there were loan agreements in which the Guineans were obliged to make certain payments, but we had no program per se, with the exception of the measles/ smallpox eradication program which was operated out of CDC in Atlanta. This was a West African program in which we had teams consisting of an American with locals, aiming at eradication of measles and smallpox. They were very successful, as we know, particularly with smallpox. That was the only AID program that I can recall along with some minor PL 480 activity. I can't remember if it was Title I or Title II sales. But that was it.

Q: Were we monitoring what the various Soviet bloc people and the Chinese were doing?

THIBAULT: Oh, of course we were monitoring them, absolutely. I won't go into the details of that, but yes, that was an issue of interest to us. Not only in terms of individuals, as intelligence targets, but in terms of what they as governments were doing in Guinea and as a part of a larger pattern of what they were doing in Africa. So, yes.



Q: Well, just to sort of pick up the feelings of the time. Was there concern, now I realize you were a very junior officer, in your first post and all that, but were you picking up the feeling that we were really concerned about sort of the Communist Bloc being on the move in Africa and taking over things? Or were you seeing this as a miserable failure?

THIBAULT: I think both, in the sense that we certainly saw it as a miserable failure. On the other hand, there was a concern that Siékou Touré, as a very charismatic leader, might be a Trojan Horse for the Soviets. Nothing I have said about him begins to convey a flavor of the man's personality - someone who filled a room by his sheer presence, a very powerful speaker, a very engaging person, if you were to meet him one on one, as I observed him on a number of occasions. He was a very handsome, highly charismatic man. He was one of the icons of radical opinion in Africa. So to the extent that he could reach out to Africans, I think this was a subject of concern. In fact, of course, as I and others could readily see, Sekou's appeal was diminished by the utter failure of the Guinean economy and the steady exodus of Guineans to neighboring countries. At that time, of course, we were concerned with the stability and the long term future of pro-Western governments in West Africa but the feeling was that this was primarily a French issue. They had priority in trying to shore up their presence and their influence in the countries that had once been under their domination.

Q: Well, you were sort of, in a way, in the wrong place for this but there had been, particularly during the late Fifties and the Sixties almost hysteria in approach about Africa being the shining hope. All sorts of things were going to happen. Were you getting anybody who had been around more, sort of a dying down of this feeling?

THIBAULT: No, this was, of course, the Nixon Administration time and, no, just getting them to pay attention was always a challenge. We did have one visit then, though, by the assistant secretary, David Newsom, who came out. He was very well received by Siékou, who brought him to his private home, to his country retreat, so to speak. But, no, I don't think there were any illusions about what we could achieve with Guinea, particularly with Guinea.

Q: Well, I've heard stories of Siékou Touré who threw people sort of basically in jail and maybe not even feed them or anything.

THIBAULT: Well, there were these stories, absolutely, many of them well documented. Many of the people who were imprisoned in the wake of the Portuguese attack died there. Those who came out of it said they were very ill-treated. Sekou died suddenly in 1984, at the Cleveland Heart Institute, and within three or four days the whole edifice that he had built up, around the Party, particularly of the Party, collapsed. What seemed so strong and permanent was all built around one man.



Q: You get any feel for the Guineans, as far as their native abilities. I mean, different countries have got particular strengths. If you take away the problem of the president.

THIBAULT: No, we found the Guineans to be very engaging, very nice people. Very sharp and they had that reputation elsewhere in Africa, in West Africa. They were a people who were ill-served by their government; given their many qualities, they deserved a far better government. The universally held opinion was that, left to themselves, the Guineans would be very, very different, without a tyrant running roughshod over them.

Q: Well, I would assume that with a tyrant like that you wouldn't have a problem that hit some of the other places, like corruption.

THIBAULT: You would or would not, did you say?

Q: Would not. I just would think you would not want to get caught.

THIBAULT: Well, there was very little to be corrupt about, to begin with. And of course, as a diplomat you're shielded somewhat from this. The Party controlled what meager resources were available. Foodstuffs, for example, were distributed through Party channels, through what they called comites, committees, at the local, even the block and village level. Access to education, medical care, all of that depended on your standing with Party officials. How this was administered, how this was managed, I don't pretend to know in detail. In addition, there were different ethnic groups as the Guineans are a compound of different ethnicities and the Peulh, from the northern part of the country, had been opposed to Siɲ<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>kou Touriɲ<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>, who was a Malinke, in the pre-independence period. So there was a widespread feeling that he didn't trust them and that they suffered as a result. The foreign minister I mentioned himself was a Peulh, or a Foulah, another word they used, but he was a symbol. Most of the people in the regime were Malinkes, as was the president.

Q: Had Gaddafi come into power by this point?

THIBAULT: He was in power. He came into power in '67 or '68. I don't recall any Libyan involvement there.

Q: Any other country, other than the Portuguese, messing around there?



THIBAULT: No, other than the Eastern Europeans I've already mentioned. Guinea does not occupy a strategic location. It's got large bauxite deposits, but that's about all. So it doesn't have much to offer, to make it worthwhile. You'd have to have a political objective in Guinea which, surrounded on all sides by countries that had rejected the Guinean approach or model, didn't really mean that you obtained much traction. It wasn't any beachhead, it was more like a retreat. They were into survival mode.

Q: Nkrumah play any particular role there?

THIBAULT: He was visible, he was certainly visible, and he was often invoked by Siɛ̃kɔ̃kou, but no, I don't think so. His fate in Ghana certainly made Siɛ̃kɔ̃kou doubly aware of plotting around him or the potential for plots against him, particularly by the army. Which is why he relied so heavily on the Party as opposed to the army. But no, in terms of internal decision-making I don't recall Nkrumah playing much of a role.

Q: Did he play up to this non-aligned business, travel around a lot or stay pretty much to home?

THIBAULT: He stayed very much at home. He traveled very little. I think the feeling on our side was that he was afraid a coup might occur during his absence. Nkrumah was overthrown when he was traveling. So he stuck to home. In fact, he traveled very little outside of Conakry itself. So, as I say, I think Nkrumah's example influenced him.

Q: We're talking about 1971?

THIBAULT: I left in December '71.

Q: And where did you go?

THIBAULT: I then went to Sri Lanka.

Q: Ah, so you're getting down to the Subcontinent.



THIBAULT: Well, I, there's a story there, too, because the ambassador to Sri Lanka, a fellow by the name of Robert Strausz-Hupé, had been my professor at Penn. I had written to him asking if there was a spot in his team. He wrote back to say no, that staffing was complete. I get to Washington and I walk into the personnel officer, who later became a good friend of mine, Howie Schaffer. And Howie says, "What are you doing, meddling in the assignment process?" I asked, "What do you mean?" He said, "Strausz-Hupé specifically asked for you. We had somebody else who was about to be paneled. We don't appreciate that around here." Ultimately, that's where I went.

I say ultimately, because I was originally slated to go to Vietnam. Coming back to my incoming Foreign Service class of '69, fifty per cent going to Vietnam and fifty per cent on other assignments: Well, those who thought they had escaped the prospect of going to Vietnam, thought they were out of that, were informed that our second assignment would be to the CORDS program in Vietnam. In fact, I was assigned to one of the provinces in the south and was getting ready to move back to Washington to take a year's language training when, I guess, as a result of the peace talks, the CORDS program was cancelled. Or at least our assignments were cancelled. I then went out to Colombo.

Q: You were in Ceylon from '72 'til when?

THIBAULT: I was there from January '72 to the spring of '75, for slightly over three years as a political-labor officer, assigned to the political section of the Embassy. My main responsibility was to cover domestic politics with particular attention to the trade union movement. And the reason for the latter was, given the complexion of the government at that time in Colombo, that the trade unions played a particularly important role. So prior to going to Colombo I took some training at the Labor Department, orientation really. Or should I say indoctrination?

Q: Quickly, what did you get from the Labor Department, because in those days, in foreign affairs, American labor was an important policy. It had real clout in foreign affairs.



THIBAULT: Absolutely, even though we had a Republican administration, it was quite sensitive to labor and, of course, when I say labor I should be very precise in saying the AFL/CIO. The AFL/CIO then totally controlled the labor officer program in the State Department. They had a number of their former officials who were now working for the Department. There was an advisor to the Secretary for international labor affairs, who was always hand-picked by the AFL/CIO. The training program for FSOs going overseas was very much oriented to AFL/CIO interests. By that I mean exposure to the type of reporting they were interested in, which fed into their own U.S. domestic agenda, for example, foreign worker conditions as these impacted the general competitiveness of American labor; labor rights, if you will, and the legal structure that affected labor in our countries of assignment. The Federation maintained its own overseas programs, funded by the USG with which we were expected to cooperate closely, for Asia, Latin America, and Europe. Anti-communism was a powerful leitmotif of the relationships they developed with other trade unions groups, mostly under ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions) auspices. As a labor officer, and this was made very clear at the Department of Labor itself, you were expected to be very attuned and very sensitive to AFL/CIO interests and to their general clout in Washington. That was a very clear message.

Q: Was there a Mr. Asia in the Labor Department?

THIBAULT: Overseas, our awareness was less on the Labor Department per se whose focus was overwhelmingly domestic and much more on 16th street (the AFL/CIO headquarters, just a block up from the White House.) and for those in Asia on the Asian-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI.) It existed for many years and, for all I know, it is still active. There certainly was a Mr. EuroIrving Brown. He and others around him had been active right after World War II in Italy and throughout the Continent, directly confronting the Communists. I haven't thought of these names in many years. Irving Brown and the others were held up as exemplars, if you will, as dynamic models of what U.S. labor policy, working very closely with the State Department, could achieve in influencing individual countries in ways that would be favorable to our interests. Asia was perhaps less prominent but its profile was rising rapidly. The AAFLI came into being only after the European institute, but was modeled on it. As I mentioned, there was also an institute in Latin America and one, either at that time or later, in Africa as well. Above all, they were concerned about the influence of Communists in the local trade union movement and this gave particular focus to Sri Lanka or Ceylon, as it was then known, because the labor movement there was divided into various federations, some of which were strongly Communist controlled. Not only that, but in fact the most prominent of them all was Trotskyite. Sri Lanka was one of the few countries in the world where Trotskyites were influential, even having powerful ministers in the coalition government that existed when I arrived there. On the other hand, the Tamil tea workers were mostly in the Ceylon Workers Congress, which was an ICFTU affiliate and worked closely with the AAFLI.



Q: Was Mr. Bandaranaike, was he a labor man?

THIBAULT: No, but his wife, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, was the prime minister when I arrived. She was certainly left of center in our terms and in her cabinet was the head of the pro-Moscow Communist Party, a fellow by the name of Pieter Keuneman, of Dutch background. There is a small but influential Dutch Eurasian community in Sri Lanka. The Trotskyite minister was Colvin Da Silva along with a third pro-China Communist minister in the government. All of them had their base in trade union federations.

Q: Now who were our ambassador and DCM?

THIBAULT: When I arrived, Ambassador Strausz-Hupä½ had already left. A fellow by the name of Pete Peterson, who died some years ago, was then chargä½. Ambassador Christopher Van Hollen arrived in the late spring, I guess, of '72. His DCM was Patricia Byrne. They were the team leading the embassy throughout the time that I was there.

Q: These are two people who were familiar with Asia.

THIBAULT: Yes. I believe Ambassador Van Hollen had been deputy assistant secretary of state for South Asia in NEA at that time. Actually for Pat Byrne, it was her first exposure to Asia, but as is often the case, the ambassador had selected the DCM. I believe she had been in Turkey before going to Colombo.

Q: Later went on to be ambassador in Burma.

THIBAULT: To Burma, that's right and to Africa; she was ambassador in West Africa, also.

Q: How was the embassy constituted? Did you have to break ground on this labor thing, or had there already?

THIBAULT: No, I was taking over from my predecessor, Jim Leader, who then became desk officer and remains a good friend of mine.

Q: Jim has been very much a labor officer.



THIBAULT: Yes, over the years, that's right. For me, it was my first and only assignment as a labor officer but Jim's advice, counsel, and contacts were very helpful and greatly appreciated. So it was not a new position, nor a new area of attention by Washington. But otherwise the embassy was typical, in terms of the sections that were there and the agencies that were represented.

Q: So, what was the political situation, and economic situation, in Ceylon when you arrived?

THIBAULT: I recall very well taking a trip up to Kandy, which is the second city, in the interior, shortly after my arrival, encountering burned out bridges and evidence of the brief but very violent uprising that had taken place just weeks before my arrival, which as I mentioned was in January of '72. In what I believe is November or December '71 an extreme Communist group, extreme Maoist group, called the JVP, a very conspiratorial group, had organized and mounted an overnight attempt to topple the government. This included attacks on Temple Trees, the prime minister's official residence in Colombo, and coordinated attacks on police posts and other security agencies around the island. It was defeated, but only just so, with a considerable amount of luck on the part of the government. So, understandably, the environment there was very tense and was still resonating with what had just happened, both at the public level and within the government. There was enormous concern about what this meant, who was behind it. In Asia, my experience is that conspiracy theorizing is a dominant part of people's political analysis. How should the government then move ahead? This was very much in the forefront.

Over time and as it became clear that this was a relatively small though highly motivated group, they settled into this very typical Third World socialist agenda, the centerpiece of which was the nationalization of the tea plantations. Sri Lanka, or Ceylon then, is a major tea producer. Many of these plantations and estates, as they're called there, had been British owned and there was a very large British planter community still resident in Ceylon at that time. Very systematically, through legislation that they adopted, they took over the management and ownership of these plantations, but with very little real compensation. It was all in long term government bonds very little cash involved for the dispossessed owners. This was accompanied by other pieces of legislation which met the needs of their trade union coalition allies.



There was and still is, as I understand Sri Lanka politics to this day, enormous tension between Mrs. Bandaranaike's party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the previous ruling party called the UNP, United National Party, then headed by former Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake and his deputy, J.R. Jayewardene. These two, like the Bandaranaiques, were members of very prominent families, of the same social background, educational and caste background. In many ways politics then, maybe even today, were organized on divisions among families, prominent families, with ideologies as a convenient tag. At that time, the Tamil issue, which later became an all-consuming one in the Eighties, Nineties and even today, was not as salient. The Tamils - and I had many contacts with the Tamil leadership at that time, both in Colombo and then through regular travel up to the northern part where they're concentrated in Jaffna - were still hoping to find a place in this evolving system. But the ruling party reflected Mrs. Bandaranaike's husband's philosophy, and he was the founder of the party, which was one of appealing to the majority Sinhalese and to Buddhist sentiment, and of feeding on the perceived grievance that the Tamils had been favored by the British and, although a minority of only 15 per cent, they had enjoyed undue benefit from this history, in terms of positions in government, in the private sector, in education and so forth. So he went about cutting them down to size, using the one man one - vote principle, sort of excluding them from any real role in public life, and aiming at marginalizing them. A keynote of this was making Sinhalese the official language, excluding Tamil and even English. This became a real sore point for the Tamils, who of course also felt excluded because the ruling party played up the role of Buddhism, made Buddhism the official religion of the country, although there were very substantial Hindu, Christian and Muslim minorities. So it was a polarized society, if you will, split on ideological grounds, as I mentioned, in terms of the economic policies they pursued, and on ethnic, linguistic, and religious factors. If you could identify all of the factors that help divide a nation and a society, in Sri Lanka they pursued them all.

Q: I can't think of a worse recipe as you said than what their party was trying to do.

THIBAULT: So that was the environment. So far as the U.S. government was concerned, Sri Lankan foreign policy was what you might have expected of that kind of regime, which was very nationalistic, very Third World oriented. Mrs. B, as everyone called her, viewed herself to be her husband's heir as a leader of the non-aligned movement. After I had left she hosted one of the non-aligned summit conferences in Colombo. So her public line and the policy line of her government were very much couched in non-aligned terminology. It pitted her against U.S. policy rhetorically, in UN votes, and in Asian regional terms. Vietnam was winding down but only slowly, so that was a source of tension and certainly of pot shots, particularly from the leftist members of her government. And she particularly favored something called the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace, which was directly aimed against the U. S. Navy presence in the Indian Ocean, especially at Diego Garcia.



The only additional point I would make, in response to your question about the economy, is that their economic policy was of the same type as their politics. In other words, an emphasis on state management of the economy which of course led to slow decline, stagnation of their exports, and a lot of other problems.

Q: I would think, you know, just looking at tea plantations, which require very close management. This isn't something you just sit there and let it grow. And it's just the sort of thing that socialist management would try to get in there, milk for what it could and not put the resources and the management in.

THIBAULT: Well, that the management aspect; the labor tended to remain in place and again that was sort of part of the nationalization deal with trade unions. But you're quite right, the expatriate managers and Sri Lankan managers who were running these places earlier were replaced by political appointees. And of course, the other thing about tea plantations is that they require steady reinvestment. Bushes, what they call the tea bush, particularly in Sri Lanka at that time, had been planted in the 1880's and 1890's, and were old. They were not as productive as those in East Africa or in some areas of South India. It was time for significant replanting of new tea bushes and that was not done. So the profits, such as they were, were not reinvested as they should have been. So there was an immediate decline. This also, by the way, fit the rubber plantations. Sri Lanka was an important producer of natural rubber and coconuts. All three of those areas were primary commodities affected by similar state-oriented policies. I understand that since then, speaking about many, many years later, they've attempted to reintroduce private management and private ownership, but I have no idea how that is faring now.

Q: As the labor officer, you're looking at people, many of whom have relied on these plantations or estates of one kind or another, under steady management and if you socialize it, pretty soon when they start going to pot, the money isn't there, the benefits aren't going to labor. Is that apparent in your case?



THIBAULT: To be absolutely honest, one of the driving forces behind this nationalization was that labor didn't get much to begin with. An important source of grievance is that while the plantation labor force is Tamil, in Sri Lanka - if we want to get into nitty- gritty detail - the Tamils are divided into two communities. One are the northern Tamils, who have been there for many centuries. The second are indentured laborers who were brought to Sri Lanka, as to Mauritius and Trinidad and a number of other places, by the British in the late nineteenth century. They're very distinct from the ones in the north. They led self-contained lives on these estate enclaves, surrounded by Sinhalese villagers. The villagers felt that they weren't getting anything out of this system. They weren't getting any jobs for their young people or obtaining any benefits. So there was a hope that under state management the fruits of this would not go to foreign businesspeople, who would send out the money, but would invest it locally. None of that happened. Even when I was there, those trends began becoming apparent.

Q: How did our embassy, through the ambassador and up and down the embassy, including your contacts, how well were we connected to the government?

THIBAULT: We had good relations. Ambassador Van Hollen, of whom I have the very highest regard, had excellent relations with the GSL. For all of its shortcomings, this was a democratic government. They were freely elected. They conducted free elections, they always have. They were Western oriented, spoke excellent English. I'm talking about leaders drawn from the upper crust of traditional colonial society. They were very accessible. It's not that we were not able to interact with them at all. We had excellent contacts. We were able to see them when we wanted and there were points of agreement as well. For Sri Lankans, regardless of background or politics, are always concerned about the shadow of India. So they would want good relations with the United States, if only to balance potential Indian influence. It's just that on basic issues we often disagreed. As I say, the key one was this whole package of non-alignment and in particular the Indian Ocean Peace Zone.

Q: Well, we were going through a difficult time, as I think you expressed before, with India, anyway. They had the dissolution of East Pakistan and all that. But this didn't particularly draw them closer to us?



THIBAULT: The Sri Lankans, you mean? No. I arrived not long after the Indian intervention in East Pakistan but, to a surprising degree, there seemed little concern about what this might mean for Sri Lanka. This fact is itself a good indicator that the Tamil issue was nowhere near what it became just a few years later. You'll recall that India did intervene in Sri Lanka in the late 1980's. There was also the perceived similarity in views between Mrs. B and Indira Gandhi, the Indian prime minister at the time. In general, it was felt that New Delhi would act as a break on the Tamils, limiting the support they might receive from fellow Tamils in India. There was a history there. Prior to the colonial period, the kingdoms in south India often intervened in Ceylon and those memories are still quite vivid.

This is a long way of saying that concerns about India at that time did not lead the Sri Lankan leadership to draw closer to the U.S.

Q: How were, what's the name of the province in India's that's across

THIBAULT: Tamil Nadu.

Q: Tamil Nadu. Was there much sort of leakage back and forth, or what was happening?

THIBAULT: No, I would not say so. I would not say there was much. No. There were pilgrimages of Sri Lankan or Ceylonese Hindus to shrines in south India but no, there was no immigration, or emigration for that matter of the kind that existed some decades before. Later on in the Eighties, when the Tamil insurgency developed, there were strong ties between the Tamil nationalists in Ceylon and Tamil counterparts but they excited as much suspicion in New Delhi as they did in Colombo. It was a Tamil extremist, you'll recall, who assassinated Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. I should mention, by the way, speaking of the Tamils, as I said I had a lot of contact with them, but the people I dealt with were of an older generation and not the ones who launched the insurgency which began in the early Eighties. These were much younger men. The ones I knew were in their sixties, seventies, sometimes in their eighties, so were trying to carve out a place for themselves in the existing system. Whereas the younger ones and I had no contact with them because we didn't even know they were out there, the militants who later said, "The hell with it, we want independence."

Q: Did naval matters, outside of the Ceylonese wanting this Zone of Peace, were we concerned about, say, the Soviets using that

THIBAULT: Trincomalee.



Q: Trincomalee as a base?

THIBAULT: No, the Sri Lankans were very jealous of their independence and very sensitive to Great Powers meddling in their own country, and I know there were some so-called strategists in Washington who were fearful of that, but it was never really an issue. The most specific issue we had, if you could call it naval, was Diego Garcia. Our presence in Diego which began to be built up during the Vietnam War and thereafter to counter the Soviets in the Horn of Africa, was a major reason for the Sri Lankans and others pushing the Indian Ocean Peace Zone. I don't recall any ship visits, any U.S. Navy ship visits, which isn't to say there weren't any, my memory just doesn't call up any at the moment. We had a navy attaché<sup>1/2</sup> then; in fact the defense attaché<sup>1/2</sup> was a naval officer, a U.S. Navy commander. Operationally, there weren't any really issues.

Q: How'd you find, what were you reporting. Were you more or less limiting yourself to labor or were you reporting on what amounts to internal politics?

THIBAULT: No, no, I was reporting on internal politics. I would have hated to follow merely the minutiae of Ceylonese labor politics. As it was, no one in Washington cared two hoots about what was going on in Sri Lanka or Ceylon, anyway. Nobody read our reporting. I know that only too well, because my next assignment was as desk officer for Sri Lanka, so I knew very well how little anyone paid any attention. No one paid any attention, or very little attention, to South Asia at that time and least of all to Sri Lanka. So just getting Washington to read what we were reporting was a chore in itself. Just as an anecdote illustrating this, I was particularly proud of what I recall was a 25 or 26 page air gram. You may recall that instead of telegrams in those days, unless it was really urgent, we would send an air gram, which went by pouch. It was a 26 page analysis of the so called land reform program, ( i.e. nationalization.) I was very proud of that work which built on considerable research, field travel, and interviews. So when I returned to Washington I recall a conversation in the bureau. Someone, not knowing I was its author, held up my airgram and said, "If you want an example of what's useless reporting, here it is, right here." And slapped it down on the table all 26 pages of it. I learned a very important lesson from that experience. On the other hand, we enjoyed considerable latitude at post since no one cared really much about what was happening there. We had virtually no U.S. investment, no significant high level visitors. We had one or two CODELs (Congressional delegations) who came to shop for gems, Sri Lanka being a source of sapphires, shopping expeditions. Therefore, we could do pretty well what we wanted. There was no post reporting plan in those days, coordinated with Washington. So it allowed you to get into the nitty-gritty of the country. Which I did. Today, as I know only too well from my DCM experience, officers are pulled in so many directions that this is rarely possible. And in places like the Arab world, we pay a heavy price.



Q: Well then, as for being in this hot spot for a couple, three years, I guess. Were you married at the time?

THIBAULT: I was married. I was married in '68. I came there with my first child, a boy and then our second child, another boy, was born in Sri Lanka, in Colombo. Personally, I should say, it was an extremely enjoyable experience. We had many, many friends and very much enjoyed the Sri Lankan environment and the embassy environment as well. So I look back at that as one of the high points of my career, from a personal point of view.

Q: Well then, you came back in '75.

THIBAULT: That's right, I came back in '75 and spent a few weeks on the Iran desk. The only thing I remember about that is Charlie Naas, who was the office director, called me in, welcomed me, and pointed to my desk. I was only there while they were scurrying around to place me elsewhere in NEA. And he immediately said, "Well, you'll be working on ...," I forget what it was. I said, "I know nothing about Iran." He paused and looked me in the eye, saying, "You're an FSO, aren't you?" I said, "Yes." He said, "End of discussion." He was right. That brief exchange told me instantly what being a U.S. Foreign Service officer is all about, including esprit de corps. I have never forgotten it.

After that then I went, as I mentioned before, to be desk officer for Sri Lanka in what was then and now is still known as INS, the Office of India, Nepal, Sri Lanka Affairs in the then NEA. Today it's in SA, the Bureau of South Asian Affairs.

Q: Were you it for

THIBAULT: For Sri Lanka and the Maldives. I should have mentioned the Maldives. I never made it to the Maldives when I was stationed there but the ambassador in Colombo was also accredited to the Maldives.

Q: Well then, you were doing this for how long?

THIBAULT: In INS? I was there for three years, 'til '78. I was two years desk officer for Sri Lanka, one year as political officer for India and then I went into Hindi language training for a year at FSI prior to being assigned to New Delhi.

Q: During this '75 to '78 period. In the first place, had this become Sri Lanka?



THIBAULT: Just trying to think. I believe it did, I believe it did. That's the traditional name of the country. Ceylon was the foreign name.

Q: Was there anything that happened? Were you getting 26 page reports there that got you all excited?

THIBAULT: The major issue there was grappling with the Zone of Peace concept that aimed at regulating, i.e. constraining, non-littoral naval presence and activities in the Indian Ocean, including the right of free passage. Understandably, this notion was anathema to our Navy. It became a real irritant, because it was not only a Sri Lankan notion. It had been, if I recall correctly, initiated by Mrs. Bandaranaike but it was very much picked up by India and by all the countries of the littoral who made it a centerpiece of their regional policy, recalling how the USS Enterprise had sailed into the Bay of Bengal to apply pressure on India during its 1970 war with Pakistan. It was a constant point of friction between ourselves and the Sri Lankans. Those were the days when the Soviets had a base, we thought a naval base, in Somalia at a place called Berbera and there was a lot of dire thinking about the Soviets, how they were expanding their presence in the Indian Ocean. That was sort of the grand issue, the one issue in which Sri Lanka could claim higher level attention. I recall it involving a lot of interaction with the PM Bureau, the IO Bureau (because much of this was played out in the UN environment,) and with the Pentagon. Otherwise, there was the routine work of the desk officer. A lot of managing of visitors, for example, the PL-480 program, the sort of briefing memos on military assistance or at least military relationships, briefing a new Ambassador for his nomination hearings, you just name it. But I don't recall any sort of glowing moment at that time.

Q: I would image this Sea of Peace Zone of Peace Zone of Peace wouldn't even get the time of day from, particularly the American Navy.

THIBAULT: Oh, the Pentagon was very concerned about this. If it was ever adopted and implemented then it would have severely limited our ability to deploy in the Indian Ocean. And of course, as I mentioned, it reflected a hostility to U.S. Navy operations in the Indian Ocean and had some impact on our ability to access ports, to have joint exercises with local navies, and to develop navy to navy relations.

Q: Well how did we, the Navy of course, and rightly so, immediately goes into extreme defensive mode when it comes to anything that would limit its ability.



THIBAULT: Exactly, and so there was a lot of pressure on the Department to counter this. A lot of the action took place at the United Nations and in various UN fora so that the concept wouldn't gain traction. Coordinating with our allies as well and keeping an eye on what the Russians were up to, the Soviets were up to, in the Indian Ocean. So I certainly don't recall ever twiddling my thumbs or having nothing to do, as we were always very busy. But, as I say, I can't recall the specific details of individual issues.

Q: Did you get very much involved in Indian affairs?

THIBAULT: I was backup officer for the India desk but was not directly involved until I became desk officer, political officer for India, it was called. I took that job in '77. I had come back to Washington in January '75. So '75 'til '77 and '77 to '78 I was desk officer, and then I went into Hindi language training prior to assignment to Delhi. The India desk was a higher profile job.

Q: Yes. How were relations in '77 and '78? How were relations with India? This is Carter's Administration.

THIBAULT: This was the Carter Administration. For years there was a great deal of anti-India sentiment on the Hill, and for a variety of reasons. One was the bitterness over the East Pakistan issue and the Treaty of Friendship that the Indians had signed with the Soviet Union in 1971. In 1974 you had the Indian nuclear explosion, which had an enormous impact politically here in Washington. In 1975 Mrs. Gandhi declared an emergency and suspended parliament and democratic governance. Any one of these was deeply damaging to the relationship but as one piled on to the other, it accentuated a climate of antipathy toward India, reviving old memories of Krishna Menon, who had been foreign minister under Nehru, and not made any easier by Mrs. Gandhi's acerbic style and rhetoric. There was just a view of India as a major pain in the butt.

Q: Krishna Menon hung on for years. He may have been gone, but the thought of him in the United Nations, looking like, well he looked like Khomeini, piercing eyes.



THIBAUT: Sort of jutting jaw, and so forth, yeah. So India was not held in high regard. Now mitigating this was the Carter Administration, Miss Lillian had been a Peace Corps volunteer in India, Carter's mother. As candidate, President Carter had spoken favorably of improving relations with India. Moreover, in 1977, once she lifted the emergency, Mrs. Gandhi then held elections and was not just soundly defeated, she was wiped out altogether. And a coalition government, headed by a odd fellow named Morarji Desai, became prime minister, leading a group of parties, almost all of whose leaders had been in jail under Mrs. Gandhi and who of course were committed to restoring democratic government. So this was a natural plank on which to build a new relationship.

Nonetheless, the biggest and most contentious issue remained. What I have mentioned so far has just been sort of backdrop but at that time, what the change in administration here and change of government there did not really affect, was disagreement over nuclear policy. As a result of the Indian nuclear explosion, so-called peaceful nuclear explosion, in 1974 the Administration invoked the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty which India never signed, to suspend nuclear cooperation with India. In the early 1960's, as a result of Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace program, we had built a nuclear reactor at Tarapur, which is a suburb of Bombay, that generated a substantial percentage of the power requirements for Bombay city. I think they had 250 or 260 megawatts and it was supplied with U.S. nuclear fuel, and had been for many years, a supply which was now terminated. At the same time, Carter announced that he would defer, that the U.S. would defer commercial reprocessing and the recycling of plutonium. In other words, the initial agreement had been that we would supply the nuclear fuel and then take back the spent fuel for reprocessing in the United States. So not only were the Indians, from their point of view, subject to a unilateral abrogation of an agreement but they were then stuck with the problem that they might not have nuclear fuel and would not be able to reprocess their spent fuel. So they could find themselves in a real bind. Managing this issue was the central focus for us during the time that I was desk officer and for several years thereafter. It was only in, during the Reagan Administration that we arrived at a deal in which the French, we and the Indians agreed that the French would take over the supplying of fuel.

For example, we spent enormous amounts of time on trying to find ways to reconfigure the pool at Tarapur in which the nuclear fuel rods are kept. I know nothing about nuclear reactors but my understanding is that, say you bring in a bundle of these rods, which look like steel rods. And they're used up over time. They're stored in a storage tank similar to a swimming pool full of water. There was only so much built-in capacity but if you're ingenious about it, you can find ways of storing more rods than the pool originally was intended to hold. Thus the diplomats tried to figure a way out of the bind so that Bombay city wouldn't be cut off from its electricity supply. We commissioned consultants to study this. The interagency process, as you can imagine, for these kinds of issues is extremely complex. So this was a big focus for me personally and for our office.



Q: How did you find the Indian embassy? Some embassies are more effective than others and how did you find the Indian embassy?

THIBAULT: The Indian embassy at that time, in my view, was not very effective. True, they were dealt a poor hand of cards to play, given the attitudes that existed. As I say, the Achilles heel of the U.S.-Indian relationship at that time was the Hill. The president, left to himself, I think, would have moved ahead and been much more positive. But the Hill was the problem. In addition to the legislation I mentioned, there was something called also the Symington Amendment, which really constrained the administration's freedom of action. But instead of devoting the bulk of the energy of the ambassador and his key officers to explaining themselves and cultivating relationships on the Hill, they figured all they had to deal with was the State Department and to a lesser extent the White House. But they had little or no access to the White House, so it was the State Department. It was not a very productive approach.

Q: I understand, too, that as opposed, say, to the Pakistanis, that Indians tended to stick on their dignity. So the ambassador had to meet somebody

THIBAULT: That is a stereotype of Indian diplomats that existed for many years. Fortunately, and I can attest personally to this, it is no longer accurate. But at that time, certainly, there was a lot of truth to it. They could be very prickly to deal with. They had a big chip on their shoulder. I think it reflected what anyone who lived in India was well aware of, a profound inferiority complex. It took them a long time to get over that. The Pakistanis, on the other hand, tended to be more the hail fellow well met sort. And of key importance, they had a natural constituency in the U.S. government, and thus on the Hill, which the Indians did not have, which was the Pentagon. They had military regimes, so some of their key people tended to be military officers. There was a bond there which the Indians never were able to match. They tended to be much more effective in their relations on the Hill, and substantively, policy wise, there were not as many problems with Pakistan, unlike today. But, yes, that limited the Indians, but I'm not sure that even if they had been the finest diplomats they would have been able to overcome the cards they were dealt.

Q: But it doesn't help. This is one of the things it doesn't help. Diplomacy can help or impede depending on well you use your instrument and some countries don't use their very well. And America of course is an extremely complicated environment in which to work. . The idea that if you want something done you go to the State Department is almost ludicrous. It's the Hill, it's getting lobbyists, it's getting the media, it's getting the NSC, obviously the Pentagon. It's a complicated board. If you play it by the book, you're dead. How were we, during this time you were doing this with the Desai government, he died not too long ago.

THIBAULT: He died not too long ago but he certainly was very much alive then.



Q: But how did we evaluate the Desai government and its effectiveness?

THIBAULT: Again, I think the highest personal regard was extended to Prime Minister Desai. He was a man of unbending rectitude and was recognized for that. He had suffered considerably for his political stance in confronting Mrs. Gandhi. But his virtue was also his vice, if you will. When he became prime minister with a coalition of a number of parties, it was very hard for them to pull together and he was not the kind of man to scratch one's back, I can't think of the expression here. But he just was not able to work cooperatively with his senior ministers, many of whom thought they should be prime minister as well. So the result was that he was regarded as presiding over a government that frittered away its chance, because we could see, very steadily, Mrs. Gandhi's political resurrection in India, in spite of the experience with the emergency, gather steam. So she was a very acerbic critic of the Desai government's policies and to some extent of the United States as well. So we wished them well. The President himself visited India, in '78 and Desai also made a very successful visit to Washington. As the desk officer I remember that one very well. But it didn't really translate and there was certainly no breakthrough on this nuclear issue that I talked about.

Q: How about the Indian Ocean thing? Did that gain any traction?

THIBAULT: No, it never really did. It remained a sort of a talking point for a number of years but it ran out of steam and was overtaken by other issues, particularly after the Afghan War began.

Q: Well, then, you took Hindi for what

THIBAULT: From '78, I guess from the fall, September '78 to May or June of '79, I was at FSI in the Hindi language program

Q: How'd you find it?



THIBAUT: You know, I had been a student in India before, in the Sixties, but I had not studied Hindi. I had no particular problem with languages, having been bilingual in French and English since childhood. So there was no, if you will, psychological barrier. I should say, as an aside, when I took Arabic many people asked, "At your age, you're taking Arabic? What is this? It's ridiculous." My one gripe, I still feel strongly about this, about the Hindi course that I took was the emphasis on formal, very elevated, what we call Sanskritized Hindi, which is not the language that is spoken. So Hindi is like Greek, another language that comes to mind, and there are others as well, Turkish being one. Twentieth century nationalism resulted in efforts to purge Hindi and those languages of extraneous influences to the source. The problem is that spoken Hindi doesn't necessarily reflect the high falutin' version that is taught at FSI. Ironically, Hindi and Urdu which at the spoken level are identical, separated by their script, have each been cleansed of each other's influence. Formal Urdu is loaded with Persian and Arabic with most Sanskrit words having been eliminated. A mirror image of what happened with Hindi.

Q: I had problem that when I was in Greece. They were teaching katharevousa, which is the cleaned up language. People actually spoke demotic, the people's language. We sounded silly.

THIBAUT: They're quite distinct. And exactly the same in Hindi, where they tried to purge it of Arabic or Persian words that had accumulated, after centuries of contacts with the Muslims, and they went to Sanskrit for the root source to construct a new version of the language, supposedly in part to incorporate modern concepts and terminology. So that was the language that was taught, what I call "radio Hindi." And I also spent a lot of time, particularly on the reading part of the language program, a lot of effort, but when I got there I found that nobody used it, nobody spoke that way. So that was one complaint that I had. In effect, I had to relearn Hindi, as more of a spoken, colloquial language. My second gripe about it is that - and this is true to this day, I believe - they give equal weight to reading as well as to speaking. Particularly in a one year language program, the reading is at the expense of the spoken. And when you have this gap that I mentioned between the high falutin' and the people's way of speaking, it just means a waste of time. And particularly in India, where the press you're interested in is overwhelmingly in English anyway and the local language papers all are all subsidiaries of the English language ones and where they usually translate from English into the vernacular in many cases. So when you're there and you're busy, you don't have time to spend a lot of time reading the newspapers, especially when you have so many papers in English. So they'd be much wiser to recognize that reality, teach you Hindi reading, which is very easy. It's a very phonetic language. It has forty characters. You can learn to read in a couple of hours, not necessarily understanding anything but you can mouth the words, if you will. You're much better off spending that time on speaking Hindi. Now maybe in other languages, French, Spanish, German, Russian, maybe you need that balance. It was the same when I was in Arabic. Much too much emphasis on the reading and not enough on the speaking.



Q: You went out, then, to India. I take it you went to India in '79?

THIBAULT: In summer of '79, yes. I was there for four years, from summer of '79 to summer of '83.

Q: What were relations like with India when you arrived in '79?

THIBAULT: I was political officer again in the section, again covering domestic, domestic politics, in a much larger section than I had had in Colombo. As I arrived, we were in the final months of the Desai government. He had been displaced and one of his colleagues in the cabinet, a man by the name of Charan Singh, became prime minister, with elections scheduled to be held in January. He was presiding over an interim government, a caretaker government. So this was a time of politicking. So Mrs. Gandhi was then campaigning and we got early exposure to her line of thinking because she was critical of the government for cozying up to the Americans. Then of course, in November, I believe, the Soviets moved into Afghanistan.

Q: Actually, I think it was Christmas, around Christmas.

THIBAULT: Christmas, yes, could be.

Q: Yeah, November was the hostage crisis in Iran.



THIBAULT: Shortly before that, Ambassador Spike Dubs was killed in Kabul. By the way, he had been deputy assistant secretary for South Asia in NEA. So he was very well known in our office and a great guy. The impact of his murder was just devastating in Kabul. That was before the Soviets moved in. Yeah, Christmas, I guess it was. Christmas of '79, when the Soviets occupied Kabul and Spike was killed just a few months before that, a short time before that. Then the Indian election itself was held within two or three weeks of the Soviet occupation and Mrs. Gandhi won overwhelmingly. A real seesaw: She had been so dominant during the Emergency, was just swept out of office, left with only a handful of seats in Parliament and then came back with an overwhelming majority. So it's a reflection of how dissatisfied the public was with the Desai government. And then she made comments about the Soviet occupation which just aroused tremendous anger in the United States. A very understanding and soft response to the occupation of a neighboring country, after all, just nearby, by a superpower. And that, as I say, fed into the very negative climate that had been longstanding so far as public opinion and Congressional opinion towards India were concerned. A lot of it was focused on Mrs. Gandhi, the new prime minister. She tried then to backpedal in later statements. The one I'm mentioning was at the United Nations, by a UN representative. But it was very difficult. It set the tone. I mean her attitude was confrontational and during the campaign she wrapped herself in this mantle of nationalism, Indian nationalism, and was highly critical of India's neighbors for "making eyes", which is an expression in Hindi, towards the United States. She singled out a small country like Bhutan. I can't imagine a smaller country than Bhutan and yet it was depicted as a threat to Indian security. Yet, India, by treaty, controlled Bhutanese foreign policy, literally. That's the kind of rhetoric she was willing to engage in.

Q: How did the Iranian takeover of our embassy and the Iranian revolution play in India? You were in place by that time.

THIBAULT: That may have taken place a little earlier. That was in '78, wasn't it, '78 or '79?

Q: The revolution was '78ish. The takeover of the embassy was in November '79. Shortly thereafter was the burning of our embassy in Islamabad.



THIBAULT: That was in 1980. That was after the attack on the Great Mosque in Mecca. There was no sympathy towards the Khomeini government in India. There was a concern as to what it meant for Islamic opinion in India. After all, India has the second largest population of Muslims after Indonesia. So there's always a concern about what Indian Muslim opinion might be. Now the Iranians are Shias; most Indian Muslims are Sunnis. So there was certainly no endorsement or hailing of the Embassy seizure. It was a clear violation of diplomatic status of the embassy, holding of hostages. That said, they were not inclined to be critical of the Iranians in any public comments. They deplored, they'd regret, they'd call for a resolution of the issue, but no strong condemnation. Again, I think, reflecting uncertainty over Indian Muslim opinion as well. But as I said this was quickly overshadowed by the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Q: Indira Gandhi made mollifying remarks about Soviet actions and all that. But what about in actuality? During the time you were there, how were the Indians, as we could sound it, feeling about the Soviets moving into that area?

THIBAULT: Well, the media generally took their lead from the government. One of the striking contrasts between my time in India in the early Eighties and my time in India in the early two thousands was how much the media had changed. But at that time the Indian media followed their government's line quite closely. The commentators, who are quite influential in India, all tended to echo the government, to some extent. There were some exceptions, but generally speaking.

Q: Is there any particular reason for this? Are they paid?

THIBAULT: I think there was a feeling that the Soviets were longstanding friends. The Treaty of Friendship had been very helpful to India after the war with Pakistan in the early Seventies. The Soviets had been willing to provide arms to India when we were providing arms to Pakistan. There was a feeling that the Soviets were a dependable friend of India and this attitude led to a soft-pedaling of their comments on the Soviet action. That said, there was absolutely no enthusiasm for the occupation of Afghanistan and very considerable concern with what it could mean over the longer term for India itself and for its impact on Pakistan, and therefore also its impact on the Pakistan-U.S. relationship. So as they worked this out, there was very real discomfort with the Soviet occupation, particularly since it gave us a handle or leverage and a rationale for turning our relations with Pakistan around and for beginning to develop a military supply relationship. And that sort of, in their view, brought the Cold War closer to their borders than had been the case before. But as I say, their public line was relatively muted.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Indian government? You know, at your level. And with the media and movers and shakers.



THIBAULT: I didn't deal much, being focused on domestic politics, with the foreign ministry or the government ministries. I spent a lot of time with Indian politicians, journalists. Our consular district for Delhi was, and still is, northern India. So I often traveled with the ambassador and others and by myself to neighboring states. And at the personal level, there was very rarely any of this tension that existed between the two governments, from my earliest exposure to India to the present. There's no connection between them. People would relate to you on a personal basis. Having access to them was not a problem. They'd often be flattered that an American diplomat was seeking them out and seeking their views. So that was never an issue, that was never an issue.

Q: Who were the ambassadors?

THIBAULT: The first ambassador when I was there was Ambassador Robert Goheen, former president of Princeton, who was born in India of missionary parents. In fact he was very proud that when his children were there they were the fifth generation of the family to have an experience in India. His family had first come in the 1860's or '70's. But he was appointed by President Carter. The second ambassador was Ambassador Harry Barnes, a career ambassador, the first career ambassador, in fact one of the few career ambassadors we've had to India since relations were established there.

Q: How did you see him? How did he help us?

THIBAULT: Which one? Goheen or Barnes?

Q: Barnes.

THIBAULT: Barnes was very, was extremely active. And being well aware of the sort of the big issues that stymied relations between Washington and Delhi, he set out to identify areas of cooperation which previous ambassadors had not emphasized. So in scientific collaboration, in education, in culture and generally in non-political areas, he sought to begin a process of interaction across a whole range of significant members of the elite, to the extent that that was possible. He was very successful in getting funding for this approach and in launching these through bilateral agreements at the technical level and India was a very fertile field for that. So that was his emphasis. I should add he's an excellent, in fact an outstanding, linguist. So he made it a point of learning Hindi. He was very visible, traveled extensively. He was an outstanding ambassador.



Q: Were you seeing, or was it indeed a fact, there were a good number of the young people in India, the educated group, were going to the United States, as opposed to going to say the UK or somewhere else like that? Or was that happening?

THIBAULT: That was happening, significantly. There was a tremendous demand for education in the United States. I remember well, to harken back to my previous stint as desk officer, when Prime Minister Morarji Desai came to Washington, of course we prepared all the briefing papers, these were for meetings at the White House. Then the first, or I don't know about the first, but one of the issues that he raised was student visas. I wasn't present but my office director told me that President Carter and the U.S. officials at the table were taken aback - there was nothing in the briefing papers about that. And it was sort of a mark of Desai's quirkiness; he hadn't told anyone in his own entourage he would raise it. They were all staring at him. What the hell is this about student visas? And then he launched into a long explanation of how a consular officer in Madras, today Chennai, was systematically denying visas to worthy Indians. The President, believe me, worked fast to inquire what was going on. What happened was, the consular officer, someone in his late fifties for whom it was his second tour and his last assignment was claiming that all the Indians were intending immigrants, had no intention of returning, and denying visas wholesale. I was later on the Board of Examiners and, as I recall, I don't think there's an age cutoff for new officers.

Q: No, there isn't but you have to be able to complete two tours.

THIBAULT: Well, but I mean he was in sort of the, he was retiring after his second tour. He just didn't like being in India. The result of this arbitrariness coming to the President's personal attention was actually extremely beneficial for the longer term because it was made very clear to him, and more generally, that it was not appropriate for him and others to assert, in effect, that "You're studying computer science, or you're studying dentistry or electrical engineering, and you know that these jobs, most of these degrees don't exist in India or don't pay well, so therefore your true intention must be to remain in the United States." Today our presumption is different, and it was clarified as a result of this incident, namely that it is not a legitimate question to ask or assumption to make in judging the visa applicant. But it reflected, as I say, this tremendous pressure to study in the United States. Most of these young people, young men but there were many women as well, came from well established families from all over India. So they were an important, if you will, part of a pro-American constituency.

Q: All right, let's do something off of this. Students get a look at us and we're a very attractive country.



THIBAULT: And the fact is, of course, many, many, many of them remained in the United States and the Indian-American community now is quite large, and we have reaped the benefit of this twenty years later, if I can fast-forward. Because they're now quite influential in our own society, in our own economy, and they are a real bulwark of the U.S.-India relationship but this was not so obvious then. More broadly, consular officers are typically the first point of contact between the United States and local people. That, too, is not always recognized. So the guidelines reminding officers of what are the appropriate assumptions to make which they receive from the Consular section chief and from the mission leadership as a whole are really critical because that impact, that initial interaction, has ripple effects many, many times over than just the one-on-one discussion with an individual visa applicant.

Q: And, unfortunately, we're going through a very bad patch, now, the security thing and we're shooting ourselves in the foot in the Arab world with this. Well, did you find as went around the political parties, what were they, were there real issues or were this jockeying for positions of influence or jobs or not?

THIBAULT: Among the political parties? Well, the Indian parties for the most part are well established and have been there a long time and they tend to be identified with either particular areas of the country or particular interest groups. At that time the Congress Party, led by the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, was the dominant influence, inherited from the time of the independence movement. Most of the parties there were sort of split-offs from Congress, had split off over time, their leaders had set up their own groups, or they were regional parties, which are important in India. So, yeah, they had genuine and well established differences, based on those interests. But what was more important was their commitment to the democratic process and system. For India, that is really crucial, given the diversity of the country, that this is how you reconcile policy questions and issues, through a process of democratic mediation in which the opposition has a legitimate and respected role, that they are very free to criticize, to offer their own ideas and that they have access to the media and to the public channels of communication. That was all there.

The one group that was particularly influential and just strenuously anti-American was the Communist Party of India. Again, there are several communist parties and one is called the CPI-ML, Marxist Leninist, who were prominent in Bengal, much easier to deal with. But this Communist Party of India was the pro-Soviet party and their relationship with the Soviets through the Soviet embassy and the Soviet cultural center and so-called Friendship Societies, was very powerful. And they had newspapers, one particularly, called the Patriot, which were subsidized by the Soviets and we could see that. The minute the Soviet Union collapsed and this support ended, the paper folded. Suddenly the CPI, which still exists became a relatively tiny, tinny voice compared to what it had been before.



I particularly single them out and remember them because they mounted a specific campaign to deny the assignment of our new political counselor, who would have been my boss as section head, a fellow by the name of George Griffin. George had served in Calcutta in 1970-71, at the time of the East Pakistan War. The claim, again, had been made by communists, not by anyone else, that he was in touch with Pakistanis trying to undermine the Indian policy in what was then East Pakistan, what is today Bangladesh. At the time, in 1980, he was in Kabul, Afghanistan. We had not yet broken relations with the Kabul government. But his family was living in Delhi and he was stationed in Kabul as a political officer and periodically he would visit his family in Delhi as there were direct flights between Delhi and Kabul. So based on his experience, his knowledge of the region, the fact that he's a very fine officer, the Bureau decided he should be assigned as political counselor in Delhi, which made a lot of sense. When that became known, a tremendous press campaign against George Griffin was mounted, in which he was depicted as a CIA agent out to subvert the Indians. Here, it was claimed, he had been subverting them, subverting India in Calcutta, here he was conspiring with reactionary forces in Kabul and now he was going to play the same game in Delhi itself. It finally became such a drumbeat that the government specifically asked that he not be assigned, refused to accredit him as political counselor, before he arrived. We retaliated, we responded by denying then their assignment of a political counselor but it left a very bad taste in peoples' mouths. But the communists were a very loud, very vocal, and very anti-American element in the political spectrum.

Q: Did you have, see a problem from time to time that the Indians and the Americans tend to preach at each other. They're both, in some ways they preach past each other.

THIBAULT: Oh, that's been a consistent feature of our relationship. Again, excepting the last few years and when we get to that point in our dialogue, we'll have to discuss it.

Q: They've really changed.

THIBAULT: They've really changed but for a long time, for a long time, that was absolutely the case, absolutely the case, yeah.

Q: Well, did you notice this? Was there a way of getting around this or did you have to sort of listen to the sermon before you could get to the point?



THIBAULT: Well, I heard plenty of this in Delhi and traveling around northern India but you would never let these things go unanswered. Not that you would respond with a sermon of your own, but to whatever the kernel of their complaint was, you - at least my approach was - sought to address that, so that they would understand that there's a rebuttal, if you will. It varied a lot depending on the individual and maybe even categories of individuals. If you were with the politicians, you found much less of it. They were pragmatists who had survived a lot to be where they were. The journalists, on the other hand, tended to be the lecturing type and of course there were the academics, but also many plain citizens would sound off.

Q: How about the academic connection. In so many places, academia, including the United States, seems to be the last refuge of the theoretical Marxists, of the sort of anti-American line of thought. Was that evident?

THIBAULT: There was plenty of that. Particularly since there were a lot of newspapers in Delhi and in other major cities, all in English. They had to fill those pages and there's always an editorial page. So academics were often called on to contribute their thinking to that. And so when the issues were on international affairs there was very often an anti-American tinge to that or, as they would phrase it, a "non-aligned" perspective.

Q: What was the situation as regards the Sikhs? Was that the Punjab? Because this later cost the prime minister her life. But how did the situation, while you were there, how did we see this?

THIBAULT: Punjab was part of my beat, if you will, and I often went there, up to Amritsar and Jullundur, occasionally to Chandigarh, the state capital, but that's just an artificial town, or it was at that time. I heard a lot of grievance against Mrs. Gandhi, sort of against the system. A feeling that Sikhs were discriminated against. A lot of it were echoes of what I had heard in Sri Lanka from Tamils. But this was several years before so many Sikhs moved into an extremist and very violent phase. It's just a reminder that you have to be very careful in dealing with minorities, in any society. In many ways, it was hard to understand their grievance. Sikhs are among the most prosperous Indians and Punjab is among the most prosperous states in India. Also the Sikhs, unlike the Tamils in Sri Lanka, have long exercised a role and had a visibility on the national scene out of proportion to their numbers. The national government had always gone out of its way to accommodate the Sikhs, such as by creating a Sikh majority state, and this with very little public or Hindu opposition.



A lot of it was wrapped up in internal Sikh politics and again, just as in Sri Lanka, where the Buddhist monks were the seedbed of a lot of this very aggressive form of Sinhalese nationalism, and likewise the mullahs in Islamic countries, in the Sikh environment, the Sikh religious men and holy men - technically there's no priesthood for Sikhs - were very active. And then of course you had political factions. You had Sikhs aligned with the Congress Party and you had other Sikhs who were against it. And you know in poor countries where politics is a zero-sum game in many cases, any advantage to you is at the expense of someone else. And so unless you're careful in how you manage this and unless you're inclusive as well, you can generate a lot of resentment and a sense of grievance. And I think this is what happened in Punjab.

Q: At this time and again we're talking up to '83, did the expatriate Sikh communities in Canada or the United States play any role?

THIBAULT: No, that would be, that was after, particularly after the Indian siege on the Golden Temple, which I believe was in '83. So that event really generated enormous resentment overseas. And again, the Tamil parallel is striking, because your most militant Tamils, so far as Sri Lanka is concerned, typically are the ones who tend to be overseas and provide the funding and the support, like the Irish in America for the IRA.

Q: And other groups. And, of course, the Sikhs and the Tamils killed two Gandhis.

THIBAULT: Two Gandhis, that's right.

Q: You were there when Ronald Reagan came in.

THIBAULT: He was in '81, yes, right.

Q: Do you recall, how was he portrayed? This is kind of a shocker to people, a movie actor and all this, all of a sudden president of the United States, coming out of the right wing. Now it's not as extreme right wing as we see today, but in those days it was the extreme right wing of the Republican Party. Is this in a way a problem to explain it or is this a matter of concern, or what?

THIBAULT: I think there was a shock, after Carter, who, as I say, personally had made gestures reaching out to India that Reagan would succeed him. That said, Mrs. Gandhi was very much a pragmatist and she did not make any special effort to criticize, if you will, our new choice of a president. There was concern that the Republican administration would provide more arms to Pakistan. That's really the touchstone of the U.S.-India relationship.



Q: Well it seems the Democrats give money or are more friendly to India, Republicans more to Pakistan. It's not really true,

THIBAULT: No, it's not true.

Q: But it's one of those political urban legends.

THIBAULT: That's right. In fact historically, and I think many Indians will tell you this, now, that relations with the United States have been best under Republican administrations. And, surprisingly enough, that was the case with Reagan, as well because he acted to put Tarapur behind us. Remember I mentioned that this had been the sore point when Carter and Desai met. They had been unable to resolve it, in spite of all the flowery expressions of good will and personal admiration and so forth and so the issue just floundered there, poisoning the relationship. To Reagan's credit, he said, "We gotta do something about it" and in a very short period of time we came up with a policy whereby we stepped out of the picture, the French stepped in, and we didn't continue insisting on safeguards for their reactors even though we had stopped supplying fuel, which had been the line beforehand. I mean the nonproliferation theologians populated the Democratic administration and were much more muted during the Republican administration. That made a significant impact and there was also a very good meeting between Reagan and Mrs. Gandhi at Cancun.

Q: I talked to, I think it was Steve Eisenbraun and Steve was in Washington, describing the work that went into a Gandhi-Reagan meeting. The idea being that Ronald Reagan could charm, I won't say the pants off anyone, it's not true but anyway he's a real charmer and it was genuine. The thought, you know, let's sort of let these two get together and it worked at the time.

THIBAULT: It worked and Mrs. Gandhi herself, who made a very successful visit to Washington, could be equally charming. And again, coming back to Harry Barnes, who was Reagan's ambassador in New Delhi, as I said, Harry's concept was to identify specific areas for cooperation. He was doing this, to a major extent he was giving the lead to this but the administration was prepared to follow him, or at least it was a give and take with the administration, saying why don't we try this. Now this had never happened with Carter. And then the shock of the Afghanistan issue had died down, we had overcome it. And then, of course, Mrs. Gandhi died in '84, when Reagan was still president.

Q: Had we started getting very close to Pakistan and arming the mujahideen in Afghanistan while you were on this tour in India?



THIBAULT: We had. After the invasion of Afghanistan the administration had sent out two envoys. One was Clark Clifford to New Delhi and the other was Zbigniew Brzezinski to Pakistan. The Pakistanis were as much under the nuclear gun as the Indians were and we had terminated our military and arms supply relationship with them under the Symington Amendment, as we had for India. Not that we had had any with India and therefore the impact was all the greater for Pakistan. But we reversed this on a dime when, after the Soviet invasion, both in Congress and in the administration, the view was we had to work with General Zia, the president, the dictator of Pakistan. So Brzezinski came out. He offered \$400 million worth of military assistance. Zia became famous for rejecting this, saying it was peanuts, given the risks that Pakistan was asked to assume in confronting a superpower in the neighboring territory. So we went back to the drawing board and we agreed to what the Pakistanis really wanted, which was F-16's, which was then a more powerful, potent aircraft than what India had. So this created enormous uproar in India. This was in '80, '81. The covert dimension of the relationship with Pakistan, which was led by the Agency, I think developed more in the mid-Eighties, '84, '85, '86, with Pakistan. By definition, that was very much less visible than had been the case before. By that time we had a new prime minister in India, anyway, Rajiv Gandhi, the son of Indira, who was much less abrasive than his mother had been and represented a new generation, very much a difference in tone than had been the case earlier.

Q: Well one more question on this period. Did Kashmir play any role while you were there?

THIBAULT: Other than being just a longstanding issue, no I don't recall that it was an element we followed closely or impacted the bilateral relationship. The militants who, to this day, infiltrate and attack in Indian Kashmir itself were not a factor at that time. So, no, I would not say it was.

From Delhi I went to Karachi, Pakistan.

Q: The other side of the moon.

THIBAULT: The other side of the moon, that's right, as political officer and deputy principal officer at the consulate general in Karachi.

Q: I just might add, I think we had, for a long time, a pretty good program of exchange of officers going back and forth, between Pakistan and India, or not?



THIBAULT: There's a, if I can use the term, there's a cadre of South Asianists in the Department, people like myself who have been interested in the region and sort of sought out assignments there. Not that many, but there have been some. Then there are many more people who, unlike in my career which has been overwhelmingly focused on South Asia, who will spend some time in the subcontinent, then go on to other regions, back to Washington, work on other issues and return years later.

Q: Al, off to Karachi. You were in Karachi from 1983 'til when?

THIBAULT: 'til 1986.

Q: What was your job there?

THIBAULT: I was deputy principal officer and political officer.

Q: Who was the consul general?

THIBAULT: Well, I had two. The first consul general was Alex Rattray and the second was Larry Grahl.

Q: And '83 to '86, when you were there, what was the situation, would you say, in Pakistan?

THIBAULT: Well, let me first comment about the consul general and this ties in with the situation in Pakistan. I was told before coming to post, and I was transferring directly from New Delhi, that the embassy in Islamabad had not liked the reporting coming out of Karachi. Apparently it was too much focused on reporting on the criticism of and opposition to the government of President Zia-ul-Haq, General Zia-ul-Haq, who had seized power a few years before and had executed the democratically elected prime minister, Mr. Bhutto. I don't know what the particulars were of post reporting which displeased Ambassador Spiers and others there but that was what I was told. So they appointed Alex Rattray, who had been economic counselor in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, to be the new CG and who turned out to be a first rate guy. I just mention this because it's easy to get focused on the political environment but I think it's also interesting in the context of what you and I are doing here in revisiting history to talk a little bit about some of these other issues. And I want to get back also to the relationship of a consulate to an embassy, at least as I experienced it, because then I went on from Karachi to be consul general in Lahore. So I spent a total of five years at subsidiary posts in the same country.



Q: You'd been dealing in South Asian affairs. Before you came there, had you picked up this split between the consulate general and the embassy? The very famous one with Arch Blood in the early Seventies, before Bangladesh was formed. We've had other ones of this nature but the Subcontinent seems particularly prone to this.

THIBAULT: I would differentiate. I would say that Pakistan seems particularly prone to this.

Q: I think you're right, because I really haven't heard much about India but Pakistan seems to be prone to this. Just give a feel, for a South Asian hand, before you went there, were you aware? Were people talking about this sort of thing?

THIBAULT: I honestly can't recall that they were. In my job in New Delhi, which was focused on domestic politics, political reporting, I didn't really, I can't recall tracking very closely what was going on inside Pakistan, much less on the mood within our embassy there. So I can't comment on that. All I'm saying is that this is what I was told in Washington and this accounted for the selection of this particular gentleman as CG. As it turned out, Ambassador Spiers ended his assignment and left Pakistan. In fact, I can't recall that he was even at post when I arrived, I would have to check. Ambassador Deane Hinton then succeeded him as ambassador and was a very different kind of individual and had a very different attitude, as well, towards post reporting.

Coming back to your first question on Pakistan. It was a very different Pakistan than the one that we hear about and have heard have so much about, especially since 9/11, yet Pakistan remains, was as internally divided then as it is now. That has been its history since it was created back in 1947. What is today Pakistan, West Pakistan, for many years was on the margins of British India and less well integrated into the British Indian structure than what is today India proper. So you have very deep ethnic and regional divisions. Now all of the South Asian countries to some degree or the other face this but Pakistan more than any of the other, by far, and they have fewer institutional mechanisms to deal with this. As reflected in the fact that you've had constant oscillation between democratically elected governments and military rule that extends to the present day.

Q: Well don't they have an institutional point of view, maybe not from any other point of view but institutional point of view, don't they have the same structure that India had? Didn't the British leave them with the same structure? Was there something different?



THIBAUT: Well, there were a number of important differences that over time were crucial. First, you had difference in experience and perhaps even of quality of leadership at the beginning. Nehru, who took over as prime minister of India after being the leader of the Congress Party, second only to Mahatma Gandhi, had a very deep seated commitment to the rule of law and parliamentary institutions. But equally important, he remained on the scene for many, many years after Indian independence. He died in 1964. So his instinctive reaction, as crises arose in this new country, was to handle them in a way that was in accordance with these democratic norms and parliamentary institutions.

Pakistan, by contrast, its leader, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, died within a few months of Pakistan becoming independent. He's considered the father of the nation of Pakistan. It's hard to believe that Pakistan could have come into existence without this man of tremendous will and capacity to impose it on others and to arouse others as well. So that was a major blow to Pakistan. As I said earlier, you had, I guess it's summed up by the fact that the very word Pakistan is an acronym, it's an artificial word. It stands for Punjab, Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Sind. The word was concocted by a student in London back in the early Thirties, looking for a word that would have a common meaning to the Muslims of South Asia, but focusing on the particular areas where they were in a majority. And even then it did not include Bengal, what then became East Bengal, because they didn't even think of the Bengalis as part of this movement. So when they became independent, they patched together these entities which had never historically in any sense cooperated or coexisted, even. The only common denominator for them was that they happened to be Muslim. They were able to play that card, the leaders of the Muslim League, who founded Pakistan, led by Jinnah, were able to play that card for fifty years until Pakistan was created.

But when it came into existence, in the absence of their leader, who could play, perhaps, the role that Nehru did, they were thrown on men of far lesser stature and far less skill and far more rooted in their own ethnic and geographic and regional roots. Jinnah had been a lawyer from Bombay, he wasn't even a Sunni Muslim. He was not a practicing Muslim. He was the antithesis of the so-called Islamic leader that we have in mind in the post-9/11 setting. So in a sense he could appeal to everyone because he didn't belong to anyone. And from the very beginning you had difficulties between East and West Pakistan, the east wing and the west wing, as they used to call it, starting from the fact that East Pakistan had a larger population than West Pakistan. And yet the leaders of West Pakistan were not inclined to allow majority rule, because this would mean that their institutions would be dominated by the Bengalis, for whom many of them had the utmost scorn.

Q: I want to return to the situation in Karachi.



THIBAUT: I mean all of this background info is relevant and came into play within a few days of my arrival. Karachi, which - I should explain here - is Pakistan's commercial center, a city today of ten to 15 million people, and also an amalgam of different ethnic groups and Muslim sects. So within a few days of my arrival, we had the Sindhis, the people who inhabit the interior of Sind, the province in which Karachi is located on its coast, demonstrating in very sustained ways, against the military regime, which they claimed was dominated by Punjabis, led by General Zia himself, President Zia. In fact for my entire tour there, we were focused, in our reporting, among other things, on the ethnic tensions that existed in our consular district, which included Sind and Baluchistan, the latter is the province that is south of Afghanistan and is east of Iran, a very large province. There too, in Baluchistan, you had very strong opposition to what they considered a Punjabi-led military government. Since the Punjabis, who are the largest ethnic group of Pakistan, dominate the army, and you had military rule and you had officers on detail supervising and overseeing many aspects of local and provincial government, it became very focused on the Punjabis.

So the situation was different, as I say, from what it is today, twenty years later, in that, while tensions were great, while there was occasional violence, it was not Islamic focused. The Islamists who are so much a source of concern to the U.S. government today, were part of the political woodwork but they didn't take the lead. They had their steady seven to nine per cent of the vote and some of their leaders were well known but Islam and the question of terrorism and related violence were just not issues at that time. Very, very far from what they are today. So we at the consulate, and I as the political officer, had contacts with a broad spectrum of political opinion there and with public opinion.

As I said, Karachi is Pakistan's commercial capital. The business community of Pakistan is overwhelmingly concentrated there. There are many very sophisticated, very savvy, well traveled, well educated, well spoken people in the professions, in business, in the media and so forth with whom we interacted on a daily basis. That of course is our main role, if you will, in that Islamabad, being an artificial city, a very new city, had become the capital of Pakistan only in the early Seventies. Had become, technically, in the mid-Sixties but the government offices only moved up there in the early Seventies and was a totally artificial creation with just a population of bureaucrats and politicians at that time. In many ways the real life of the country was conducted in Karachi and in Lahore, which is why we had consulates in both of those cities. So that was our job, to report on that.



I should mention that the Consulate General at that time was the third largest in the world, believe it or not, after Hong Kong and Frankfurt. The reason is that a large infrastructure of U.S. embassy, warehouse buildings and offices, and residential properties had been developed in the Fifties and Sixties to support our relationship with Pakistan, because Karachi was then the capital of Pakistan. So when we moved those functions and built new facilities in Islamabad we left behind all this quite modern, relatively new, well constructed, very centrally located property that exceeded the needs of an average consulate. And what do you do with it? One answer was to place other USG offices, such as Customs, DEA, AID regional functions, etc. We had 80 US personnel stationed in Karachi in the mid-80's.

A very large percentage of your Pakistani visa applicants applied in Karachi and were often referred to (us) by Islamabad. So we had a large consular operation there. However, security was not a major focus. I cannot even recall whether we had an RSO at post then. Since then, of course, Karachi has become a byword for a vulnerable post, having been directly attacked a couple of times, and witnessing the murder of several Consulate employees, threats, and the killing of other foreigners in Karachi.

Q: Well, but still, wasn't there a concern about what had happened in Islamabad in '79, the burning of our embassy? I mean, this is a sudden mob taking off. This could have been stoked up. Wasn't it something you were concerned about?

THIBAULT: It was something that we were well aware of. I myself, traveling from Delhi, had attended a regional political officers meeting in Islamabad only a few months after the attack and had walked through the charred floors of the Embassy that had been set alight by the invading mob. At the time, the analysis was that most of those who attacked the embassy were not Pakistanis but were Palestinians, many of them, who were students at the university in Islamabad. And it immediately followed and was precipitated by the terrorist assault on the Grand Mosque in Mecca. So I think at the time it was viewed as sui generis and did not necessarily imply that there was a wider threat to American facilities and personnel in Islamabad or elsewhere in the country. Also, of course, when I arrived in Karachi the incident had taken place four years earlier and there had been no follow-through. The concern that we had, so far as there was one with security, was more with Iran, because the Iranian Revolution had taken place, and the seizure of U.S. hostages and there was a large Iranian consulate in Karachi. I should add there were at least forty or fifty consulates in Karachi at that time. It's a rather large diplomatic presence there.



And there were many refugees who came out of Iran, such as Zoroastrians, or just people who found life impossible to live in Iran itself and they would come across the border into Baluchistan and would make their way to Karachi. Many were young men who were evading, escaping military draft. You recall the Iranians would just throw human waves of so-called religious volunteers in an attack on the Iraqis, and families who didn't want their sons to be caught up in that would send them out. Many of them would turn up on us, looking for visas to go to the United States.

The attack on the embassy in '79 had receded in our consciousness at that time, as I recall. I'm speaking more than twenty years later. But it was not an overwhelming, dominant concern. Again, I have to emphasize, and I've seen it, myself, as a DCM in Saudi Arabia and India, years later, that our focus, total focus, on security is a relatively new thing.

Q: First place, sort of the overall thing, was there, from the Karachi perspective and all, and when you had been in India, was there any real desire of India to take over Pakistan and was there any real desire of Pakistan to go to India? Was there any movement there at all?

THIBAULT: No, certainly, India accepts the existence of Pakistan. No, the Indo-Pak issue did not come to any head at that time. The Indians were concerned that the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan had resulted in closer ties between the U.S. and Pakistan and that we were providing military assistance to this military regime and that therefore this could pose a threat to them over the longer term, but no. You had many people in Karachi, in fact the city itself, the majority of people, are so-called muhajirs, which means refugees, and are considered almost a distinct ethnic group in Pakistan. These are Muslims of many backgrounds who had left India in 1947 and for years thereafter and had settled in Pakistan. Most of them came to Karachi. So there was a large Indian consulate in Karachi and many people would travel back and forth to visit relatives and visit religious shrines and so forth in India. So it was not a high point of tension between the two countries at that time.

Q: Well, what were you getting about, was there a tremendous disconnect in this very diverse society in Karachi and the outskirts? Was this a stronghold of Bhutto?



THIBAULT: There were, yeah, the Bhuttos themselves are Sindhis. Benazir Bhutto, the daughter of the Bhutto who had been executed, had her home in Karachi. The consul general, particularly Larry Grahl but also Alex Rattray previously, kept in regular contact with her and with people around her, as I did. She went to jail at that time for a period and we made it a point to maintain contact. This was not done not only to seek her views and thoughts on the current situation but it was also a signal we were sending to the regime that we disapproved of their crackdown on the political parties, that we supported democratic institutions, and a signal as well to the supporters of these parties that we were not so in bed with the military that we ignored or neglected them. We wanted to keep in touch with them. We wanted to have them come periodically to the United States. We wanted to engage in discussions with them. So in our representational work, we and I, particularly as a political officer, and the CG himself as well were constantly entertaining and receiving these opposition personalities and political people in general. Not only Miss Bhutto's party, the Pakistan People's Party but the Muslim League and others as well. An important part of our job was to keep in touch with these folks, doing so, I stress, with the full endorsement of the Embassy and Washington.

Q: Did you find, again, a certain disconnect that Islamabad and its area of interest and your area of interest were quite different. Islamabad, maybe, was more focused on the war in Afghanistan and the support we were giving. I would think Afghanistan would be far away from Karachi, or not?

THIBAULT: I don't think so. Ambassador Hinton was a regular visitor, four, five times a year, six times a year, he would come down, if only for a day or two and often for a longer period. In addition, at his urging, the Embassy would bring together in Islamabad the political, economic officers, and consular officers on a regular basis to make sure we kept in touch with each other. There was a concern, both in Washington and I think on his part, he perhaps having been briefed on this and he deeply believed it, that it was important to keep the mission, the country team, defined in the widest possible way, in contact and the DCM did so as well. Under his leadership, we were never guided, if you will, told what we should be reporting or not reporting or taken to task for reporting that might be different from that of the embassy. Moreover, we reported directly to Washington without going through the embassy which, if I'm not mistaken, had been the case before.

Q: I would imagine, usually if there's any dispute, the embassy usually says, "Don't do this." What about, how did the Afghan War business between the Soviets and the Afghan resistance forces, how did that play in Karachi, in your area during the time you were there?



THIBAULT: Not very much. I think the high point of the U.S. support for the mujahideen was more in the mid-Eighties and later. I'd say from '85 to '88 or so. So a little bit later than the period that I'm referring to here now. The main impact felt in Karachi was the refugees. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan resulted in an outflow of up to two million Afghan refugees and they were concentrated in camps all along the border, both in the Northwest Frontier Province and in Baluchistan. But many of the Pathans came also to Karachi and in fact the port, the stevedores and the labor connected with the port of Karachi, which was a rather major operation, was overwhelmingly Pathan. And there were certain industries, certain sectors like transportation, that they dominated. And there were sections of outlying areas of the town, of the city, where Pathans were concentrated. But as an issue, as something that intruded directly on us, no, not that much.

As I said, our consular district included Baluchistan province. As the political officer, I regularly traveled to Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan, probably three or four times a year, usually with an FSN, a tremendous fellow who knew everything and everyone. There I saw the impact of the war in Afghanistan much closer up because the refugee camps were nearby. And the influx of Pathans had greatly disturbed the ethnic balance within Baluchistan between the Baluchis and Pathans which had existed before. And there were rumors of tribesmen crossing over from Baluchistan to go into Afghanistan to fight the Soviets. In other words, some of these camps would be used as staging areas. So, as I say, in Baluchistan you certainly saw that closer up.

W: I would think that in normal circumstances there would be considerable concern, particularly in those days, of Iranian aggression but at that point Iran was so busy fighting for its life with the Iraqis that this sort of took care of that, at least for a time.

THIBAULT: Well, the Pakistani government worked hard to maintain a good relationship with Iran. About 15 per cent of the population of Pakistan is Shia. Today and in fact for the last eight to ten years, there have been very severe sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shias and with lots of mutual murders and assassinations and mass killings. That did not exist at the time but there was a concern, definitely, on the part of the security agencies and the government of Pakistan that the Pakistani Shia might become influenced by the Iranians. So they worked hard to maintain a good relationship with Iran and to provide them as little rationale for interference in Pakistan and by and large I think they were successful in that regard. And as you say, the Iranians were preoccupied with their own affairs.

Q: Well, it later became an issue so raising it for the time, was anybody looking at what was preached in the madrassas? These were what, the religious schools.



THIBAULT: Not so much, no. The attention that we gave to the Islamic parties, and this was more, later, when I was in Lahore as CG, was more on the leaders of those parties and their views about the United States, about U.S. policies and attempting to talk to them about why we were working with Zia, why we had good intentions towards Muslims, why we believed that they should work with other political parties in a democratic political context. But in terms of their local base and the role of madrassas, no, that was not a major concern, as I recall. I have to emphasize that in an era when terrorism was not the front-and-center issue regarding our outlook on the internal politics of Pakistan, the US focus was on promoting democratic institutions and an environment in which they might flourish. Hence, our constant effort to be in active touch with all elements of the political spectrum. It was a more innocent era, I suppose.

Q: You mention the security agencies.

THIBAULT: Pakistani security agencies.

Q: Pakistani security agencies. Were they sort of all pervasive? Did one feel that they were watching everyone? Were they a power?

THIBAULT: They may have been a power but they were not, there was no secret police a la Communist regimes or elsewhere. This was an autocratic rather than a totalitarian regime, as Jeane Kirkpatrick might put it. The army ran the country, not the intelligence agencies. So you had military officers in key positions. A lot of this was mediated, I should say, band in a sense, you only appreciate this by living there - by the fact that Pakistanis are gregarious, outgoing, very friendly people, very warm hearted people - and military officers are no exception. Family connection and school and other personal ties are all-important there. That's how everything gets done. Military officers, many of them, were from the same social strata as the people that you dealt with and you saw. They were not a caste apart, sort of glaring over everyone's shoulder and keeping people in line. It didn't work that way. Many of them occupied their positions to feather their own nest, this was a great opportunity to enrich themselves. Now of course as diplomats we weren't there engaging in anything that would attract their attention, or at least we hoped, anyway, beyond keeping an eye on our activities. But in the society as a whole, no, I did not feel they were watching everyone.

Q: There wasn't people whispering that "Let's not talk here" or something.

THIBAULT: No, quite the contrary, quite the contrary. They were very vocal.



Q: What about corruption. Was this an issue that was really affecting the operation of the country and were we looking at it?

THIBAULT: We were not looking at it. You know, everyone has his own definition of corruption. As I said a moment ago, the country operates, the society operates, on the basis of personal relationships and school ties and all of that as much as by law and regulation and established practice. And so we would not be directly confronted with this, except that our officers had to be definitely aware that our FSNs could be the target of those willing to pay bribes to them in the hope that they could facilitate visa issuance. This is not a problem limited to Pakistan, by the way. More broadly, you would have journalists who would tell you that there are payoffs, that military officers could not live the way they did without having additional source of income than their salaries. Not to mention many of the politicians who had come up in life as well. So that was there. We were not their nannies, so to speak, watching and documenting this and reporting on it, as I recall.

Q: How would you say the United States, I mean, again, you're dealing with a certain group, I mean the people you deal with, and how did they regard the United States, would you say?

THIBAULT: Well, there was a lot of cynicism about the United States in the sense that the common, constant theme, heard all the time, was that we talked the talk about democracy but didn't walk the walk. Especially so in Karachi, being a political town where the political parties were suppressed or under the thumb of the military but yet not in jail, with the exception of Benazir Bhutto and a few others, but not in any way afraid to speak their minds. The press was relatively uncensored and I have to empathize that point and lots of newspapers were quite critical of Zia. The cynicism was nothing new in that I heard it often in other countries as well, namely that "you Americans claim to support democracy but you're also in bed with the military dictator of Pakistan. We who are members of democratic parties, committed to everything you say you stand for, are not allowed to play the role that we should be nor is our country able to function on a democratic basis while you Americans are not only tolerant of but highly supportive of President Zia." It's exactly the same view that you hear today with President Musharraf, also a military dictator. Otherwise, let me just say, there was a very positive view of the United States as reflected by the desire to study in the U.S., to travel to the U.S., by the family ties with the U.S. that were widespread. As in India, I never encountered any hostility, on a personal basis. So it was put forth on this sort of rhetorical level.

Q: Did you find our exchange program or our visitors program a valuable instrument?



THIBAULT: It's always valuable to have exchanges and particularly for Pakistanis to travel to the United States. And I was on the all-agency Mission panel that selected candidates from a national pool, traveling to Islamabad to ensure that our consular district got its share of IV (International Visitor) grantees, and to defend or promote our recommendations. We had to vet our selection of IV program participants with the government. We could not willy nilly send someone to the U.S. They had to be approved. So in a practical sense that limited the categories of people we could invite to those who were "relatively safe" from the regime's point of view. So you had to work hard to identify those people for whom it would be a very meaningful experience but at the same time be able to get the government's approval. But that's always a very valuable program.

Q: Did you get any feel for, this is sort of mid-Reagan in American terms, a feel for how the Reagan Administration, at that particular time, viewed Pakistan and in contrast to India?

THIBAULT: Well, obviously with India led by Mrs. Gandhi and given some of the issues that I described in our earlier session, there was no love lost for the Indian government and for Indian policy on the part of many in the USG and in fact deep anger in some respects. By contrast, with Pakistan you had this close and deepening relationship between the government of Pakistan and the administration. The ambassador had, if not total access, something very close to it across the top of the GOP. The vice president, Vice President George H.W. Bush, visited on one occasion. Keep in mind, as an expression of how close that relationship was, that General Zia died in a plane crash accompanied by the American ambassador, Arnie Raphel. The other American who was on board that aircraft was the commanding general of the military assistance program. That's not a traveling team that you would have seen in India, believe me. So, yes, very different views by Washington of our relationship with the two governments.

Q: While you were there in '83 to '86 were there any incidents or developments we haven't touched on?

THIBAULT: The key one, the one that is seared in my memory, was the murder of two of our AID regional auditors based in Karachi. They were not murdered in Pakistan. They were on an aircraft that was hijacked by Palestinian terrorists at Kuwait airport and flown to Teheran where they landed. This was in '84 or '85. The hijackers identified all of the Americans who were in the aircraft and, as I recall, these two gentlemen had official passports, perhaps even diplomatic passports. They were brought to the front of the plane, of the aircraft and were shot, and their bodies were dumped on the tarmac. So these were two men whom we knew very well and whose families lived in our midst, who were down the hall, if you will, from us in the office building. That was a very shocking event.



The summer in which I left, in 1986, within days of my departure from Karachi but prior to arriving in Lahore, terrorists took over a Pan Am aircraft at Karachi airport and murdered several passengers on board before the Pakistani special forces attacked the aircraft and there was a gun battle. The terrorists were killed but others were also killed, including American citizens.

Q: Who were they?

THIBAULT: I believe they were Palestinians, also. As I say, it was the pre-al Qaeda, pre-Islamist kind of terrorism that we've become all too familiar with. But it was a precursor to the terrorism that became more frequent in Pakistan.

Q: Then you went to...

THIBAULT: In '86 I was assigned to Lahore. Ambassador Hinton very much wanted someone who knew something about Pakistan in Lahore. I had just been promoted to FS-1 and therefore was at grade for the principal officer position, having been deputy PO in Karachi, and the Ambassador made the assignment happen. While Karachi is the economic and business capital of Pakistan, Lahore is the political capital of Pakistan, because it's the capital of Punjab province.

Q: Okay, well now you were in Lahore from...

THIBAULT: '86 to '88.

Q: Again, compare and contrast, as they say in college.



THIBAUT: Looking at the consulate first, it was a much smaller operation than Karachi, for the reasons that I've mentioned. We had about 20 or 25 U.S. direct hire positions, plus dozens of Pakistani employees, while today the consulate barely hangs on with a very small handful of personnel - a reflection of how things have changed there. We had a large AID presence in Pakistan, in Islamabad, as a result of our support for the Pakistan government; in addition to the military aid component to the US-Pakistan relationship, there was a very strong economic support dimension also, and AID worked very closely with the local electric utility in Punjab. And so there was an AID contingent in Lahore; in addition, there was a DEA office of three agents, DEA agents, who worked with their Pak counterparts, a significant consular operation, and USIA as well. We had our own library and a very active information and cultural program. And we also had FBO, because we built a new consulate building there during the time that I was there, at least we started construction of it. The biggest difference, of course, was that I was principal officer, although in Karachi, I should add, for about six months I had been acting PO between CGs.

So for me, personally and career-wise, it was an opportunity to expand my management experience. We were significantly closer geographically to Islamabad than Karachi was. Karachi represented a major trip, a thousand miles from Islamabad. That was one reason why personal contact between the embassy and the consulate wasn't as frequent as it was with Lahore, where you could just drive down in a matter of a few hours, not to mention a flight of only thirty or forty minutes. So we had many more embassy visitors. It also put me in contact with the political leadership, if you will, of Pakistan. Not in the sense of the ministers in Islamabad but with many of the second and third tier politicians who could aspire to national leadership roles.

Q: Could they exist in a military government?



THIBAUT: Oh, yes, in fact there was a lot of co-opting, particularly of one of the major parties, called the Muslim League, there was a lot of cooperation. Remember that politics there is built on a society organized around clans, around caste groups, around tribes, around business relationships. In a poor country like Pakistan, the ability to deliver benefits to your followers, to your dependents, depends a lot on access to government and you cannot cut yourself off from them. Now in Karachi, which was the focus of the country's international trade and foreign investment, you were less dependent on that than you were in Punjab. There the politicians were mostly major landowners. There had been no significant land reform in Pakistan, as there was in India. In India, for example, it's very rare, it's almost unheard of and it's probably illegal, to have more than, to own more than a few hundred acres. Now you can get around it, there are ways of getting around it. But all of the big so-called zamindars, which is a local term for big landlords, were swept away in India in the Fifties. That did not happen in Pakistan. So you have, I believe to this day, people who own thousands and thousands of acres and own villages and in fact, if you will, own the villagers. That's the way their society is organized. These often are tribal leaders, as well. So these are the people who are in politics and the senior ranks of the military. So they work closely together and the Muslim League is particularly identified with them in Punjab but even others as well. So, as a result, many of these men can aspire to play national roles. As I look at the composition of today's Pakistani government I recognize many names of people I knew at the time, who were younger men then. So it was a different experience. I understand that today, the Islamist factor is much stronger and is largely divorced from these traditional elites. In my day in Lahore (and Karachi,) the Islamists were marginal players.

At that time, Ambassador Hinton, who had been a very strong supporter, if I may say so, having ensured that I was assigned to Lahore, left Pakistan and was succeeded by Ambassador Arnold Raphel, who was also a good friend and had had previous experience in our region. He and I had worked on the desk together at one point, he on Pakistan and I on India. He regularly came down to Lahore and I would often travel up to Islamabad. So my relations with the embassy were still closer, if you will, than they had been in Karachi. Of course, being principal officer I had that additional entrée to the embassy. In some ways Lahore was very similar to Karachi, in that the American consul general has a very high profile. Unlike Karachi, where there, as I said, were fifty or sixty consulates, in Lahore there were only two: the U.S. and the Iranian.



I will cite an anecdote here. President Zia would frequently visit Lahore, because of the provincial capital, official business, the military corps headquarters was also in Lahore near the Indian border. His plane would land at Lahore airport and the foreign ministry, which maintained a protocol office, would summon the diplomatic corps to the tarmac to greet the president. It seemed to me at times that I was always on my way to the airport. With the diplomatic corps consisting of myself and my Iranian counterpart, they would always place us side by side. Our instructions on contacts were very strict at that time. So I might shake hands with him, say, "How are you? Hello" and that would be it. There was never any substantive discussion. And I asked our chief of protocol, a good friend, "Why do you place us next to each other?" He replied, "We're all amused to see you guys react to each other."

But the U.S. consul general cuts a very wide swath in the local papers, in the local social affairs. So I was a very visible personality and the representational obligations were very, very heavy. You once asked if I had any children. I have two boys but they both went to boarding school. One of these interviews should talk in some ways about the personal dimension. I don't know how often this has come up in some of your sessions with other people, but a big factor for Foreign Service families assigned to countries overseas is, first, whether there's an American school and secondly whether the American school is accredited. That accreditation is very important and particularly for high school because it forces you to decide whether your children will study there at that American school or whether you'll send them elsewhere. And so for a family this is an important decision to make.

I should add that in Karachi my wife had taught at the American school, as she had also taught at the American school in Delhi fulltime. When we came to Lahore she taught there as well but the high school was not accredited and so we made the decision to send our children to boarding school in the United States. So when I mention all of these representational activities which would tie you up five or six nights a week, we were able to do that in part because our kids were not there. Although in the first year, my younger son was in the eighth grade and again, just to give that family dimension of it, he was one of the very few Americans in the eighth grade. All of his friends and peers were the sons of very wealthy Pakistani businessmen, the ones who could afford to pay the tuition at the school. I recall one evening, he came home quite late. He had been out with his friends, something I wasn't too happy about, particularly the hour at which he returned, and then he told us that they'd had been joyriding in a car and the police, when it stopped them, the driver of the car had just paid a bribe to the policeman to get them out of whatever jam they were in. I said to my wife, "This is the mindset here and I don't think it's a very healthy one for an American kid to be exposed to." His brother had already gone off to school and we decided we should do that for him, as well.



The Consul General's duties often extend in directions that few folks in Washington give much thought to, much less ensure that it be listed in your typical job description, but they can be very time-consuming. One of the more unpleasant experiences of my Foreign Service career occurred in Lahore where I was honorary chairman of the school board, representing the ambassador. This involved the Lahore American School. Someone on our staff discovered that the school had two tuition rates, one expressed in dollars and one in Pakistani rupees and the conversion rate had not been adjusted in several years. So Pakistani parents who paid tuition in Pakistani rupees, and the school needed Pakistani rupees to operate, were paying a significantly lesser amount than the dollar equivalent paid by the USG to cover the tuition of our American employees' children, absolutely contrary to U.S. government regulation. So I had to push this through and it represented a very significant and immediate increase in tuition for Pakistani parents and it faced enormous opposition and incredible resistance. But it was very clear what we had to do, if they were going to remain an American school, under the ambassador's patronage. So, we got it through the board (all Pakistanis) but in the process, I really got a closer look at the less pleasant side of the Pakistani character, if you will. As I say, I remember that this whole issue persisted over a period of several months and became something that was very time consuming. Everything would be referred to me as if I should arbitrate. I couldn't impose it; the board had to come to that decision itself. I simply said this is what the regulation is and I have to demand that you implement it. So it's a dimension of a consul general's work that I don't think exists at the embassy level and it's one you never hear about when you talk about policy issues. But in the here and now it was a big issue for me to deal with.

Not to mention also the construction of the consulate building, which required a great deal of effort to work the local bureaucracy, to support the FBO employee who was project manager, and to ensure - you were referring to corruption earlier - to ensure that our requirements of accountability, transparency, and of honest value for honest money be adhered to. So this, too, was a major preoccupation for me throughout my time in Lahore.

Q: Did we have any message, goal or something? Here you are with essentially a military, I don't know if you want to call it rule, a dictatorship yet you're going out to the political class and you've mentioned before they're looking at you with a bit with cynicism. What were you doing, sort of political wise?



THIBAUT: Well, by being there and interacting with these people on a constant basis, we had in a sense our talking points and we would use them over and over again. We had a policy message which I've described before and which was carried over to Lahore. The very fact of our being physically present was very important because we were not only a sounding board, we could be a punching bag. In other words, they could vent with us, get it off their chests, and then hear an American official respond to them. I think that's a role that's hard to quantify but which is very important. And then you would travel out of Lahore to the district level, to some major cities in Punjab province to deliver that same message. You would tell people your door was open, so you're in town, come and look me up so we can talk about these issues. That was an important part of it. The same with the public affairs office. And you work together on these issues, working with the media.

So the consular operation becomes very important in this regard, too, in the sense that we issued, at that time, many visas, it was a relatively high visa application/acceptance rate. The people who went to the US tended to be, through their family or themselves personally, were well-connected. The fact that notwithstanding their criticism of us they qualified for a visa in itself was an important message. As was the attitude that the consular officers displayed toward them, and you were always careful to make sure that their political views did not intrude on whether they qualified for a visa. And you talk to them, these were mostly junior officers, about the need for respect and courtesy and so forth, even when you knew someone was a critic of the United States. So it's a posture that your office maintains which is important there. There's a fundamental goodwill towards the United States or at least there was at that time.

Q: Speaking of consular matters, was there a problem of Pakistanis trying to get maids into the United States or not?



THIBAULT: Not so much on my watch but in Pakistan generally, I'm told, there were problems. Not so much with maids as with ineligible family members or young men who claimed to be students seeking to go to the United States. It's always a problem with Third World countries; it was a problem in India, as I have already mentioned being raised by the Indian prime minister. People who have no ties, and they'd say, "Well, I'm 22, what kind of ties to do want? I'm not married, I'm not this, I'm not that." So you have to balance that. You had to constantly be aware of the temptation to which our FSN employees were subjected, that they faced. Not to mention our junior officers. I recall a junior officer, this was when I was in Lahore, who received a letter, an anonymous note in the mail, saying, "Dear Mr. So-and-so, you don't know me but I know who you are. If you are interested in making up to \$500,000, please meet me at the Hilton Hotel at such-and-such a time." He showed this to me. So the incredible demand for visas generated these pressures. People, often very important in local politics or the business community or otherwise, would refer visa applicants to you and the question was, how do you respond to them? This is something that I learned at a very early stage in my career and that I kept foremost in my mind to the last day before retiring. There is such demand for American visas that you have to be exceedingly careful in what you tell people, neither encouraging them, nor misleading them, nor brushing them off, keeping in mind at all times the responsibility placed by law on the consular officer. More important, as a manager, and I was a manager for almost twenty years, you have to make sure the message you give to your officers on the issuance of visas and the approach they should take, is one that is in accordance with all of our precepts. It's very important, really important.

Q: Lahore is close to the Indian border.

THIBAULT: Yes it is.

Q: I think I was talking with Steve Eisenbraun, asking him about Indian-Pak relations, as seen from Lahore. Can you talk about that?



THIBAULT: Well, I recall very well, on my consultations in Washington, between Karachi and Lahore, the one and only time I was told this, that we do not want any reporting from Lahore on Sikh activities in Pakistan. It was explained to me that as we were developing our relationship with General Zia and with the Pakistanis in support of the mujahideen and the anti-Soviet groups in Afghanistan, in a sense we did not want the Zia government's image tarnished in Washington by allegations that they were supporting Sikh terrorists in India. The time that I'm referring to was a period of enormous unrest in Indian Punjab. Punjab is a province that before independence was administered as a single unit and then was split between India and Pakistan. All the Hindus and Sikhs who lived in what is today Pakistan moved to India and the Muslims on the Indian side to Pakistan. Zia himself was one of these Punjabi refugees. In India, particularly after attack on the Golden Temple, which led to the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi in 1984, there was a campaign of terrorism by Sikh militants against the Indian government, which was repressed using absolutely brutal methods.

Now, it was a great temptation for the Pakistanis to encourage and support this, just as they had been (and still are doing) with Kashmiris and Kashmir. We'll get to that when we get to my more recent assignment in India. They had a good way of doing that, because there are several major Sikh shrines in what is today Pakistan and they would allow groups of "pilgrims" to come over to visit those shrines. General Zia who was himself born in what is today Indian Punjab and speaks the local dialect, always made a point of meeting the Sikh pilgrim groups and could speak to them in their own language. Punjabis are a unique people, they are great people, whatever their religion, highly gregarious, and their language is famous for its level of humor. Zia, a quintessential Punjabi, loved that repartee. So there was an instant bonding. So I think he felt, both on a personal level and also on a state level, that a little bit of support kept the Indians off balance. So I was told, it was made very clear to me, that Washington didn't want any reporting on that. Occasionally you would hear things and see things. I mean, Sikhs are very distinctive, just by their dress and physical appearance. And you would hear things. There were some Sikhs who converted to Islam at the time of partition in 1947, so as not to lose their land in Pakistan, but they still had those family ties. So they would tell you things about what was going on along the border only 15 miles away. Otherwise, it's a heavily fortified border. Both sides have major military contingents that line it and there are major military installations along the boundary between India and Pakistan.

Q: I'm told, again, I think, by Eisenbraun, that Pakistanis kind of looked upon India, where they would go over the border, as kind of like going to Las Vegas. I mean, it was a lot more colorful. But maybe this was a different era.

THIBAULT: Well, there wasn't much traffic across the border. There was more from Karachi, mainly because the people in Karachi, the so-called muhajirs, or refugees, came from northern India, central India. They didn't live along the border. They could fly in and out. There wasn't much traffic back and forth, at that time, between the two Punjabs.



Q: Now, in Lahore, was the action in Afghanistan reflected there or were you pretty far from it?

THIBAULT: I would say we were pretty far from it except, again, for the question of the refugee camps in far western Punjab. There were far fewer Pathans in Lahore than there were in Karachi. So we were all aware of it and there was very strong anti-Soviet feeling and very strong emotional support for the Afghans but otherwise I would not say that it impinged on Lahore directly. There were no terrorist attacks. There was no overflow from Afghanistan onto Punjab, if you will, other than, as I say, the presence of some refugees, although not many. There were not many in Punjab province compared to the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan which together took in millions of Afghans, literally. By contrast, Punjab sheltered only a few thousand, probably a deliberate decision by the Punjabi establishment that runs Pakistan, in my view at the time.

Q: Did Kashmir, I realize later you'll be more involved but did Kashmir raise itself much while you were there?

THIBAULT: Not really, although interestingly a good third of the population of Lahore is of Kashmiri origin. Not so much the result of Partition in 1947 as much as 19th century urban migration. The chief minister himself of Punjab, Nawaz Sharif, who later became prime minister of Pakistan, was an ethnic Kashmiri. That did not endear him to many Punjabis who are very conscious of their ethnic origins. But as an issue, no, I would not say at that time. It became so much later.

Q: You find the political class that you were dealing with in Lahore a different kettle of fish than the one in Karachi?

THIBAULT: Yes and no. There were far fewer businessmen involved in politics in Lahore than in Karachi. As I mentioned earlier, with the exception of Nawaz Sharif, who was himself a businessman, but again he had no deep ties in the province. His father had built up a steel business. There was a very large number of military, ex-military folks who when they retired from the army went back to their lands or established businesses and then went into politics. So to that extent there was that difference, yes. Just a different tone of politics because Punjab is the majority province of Pakistan. In Sind and Karachi and Baluchistan it was all the "we against them." We're the minorities who are being stepped on by the Punjabis. Obviously in Punjab you didn't have that sentiment.

Q: Any aftermath of the loss of the "East Wing", Bangladesh?



THIBAULT: Good riddance I think was the reaction, to the extent that it came up at all, which I don't recall it ever did, in any substantive way. On a popular level, people would say that being rid of East Pakistan was the best thing that ever happened to Pakistan. There was never any emotional bond between the two wings or regions, that's for sure.

Q: Were there any events in India that were reverberating while you were in Lahore?

THIBAULT: No, I can't think of any, even though close as we were to India. I mean our focus was overwhelmingly on what was going on in Pakistan. No, I don't recall that.

Q: Did you sense any discontent or potential for problems later of the zamindar type of ownership of land?

THIBAULT: No, no, the level of politics and the agendas that the politicians fought over were dressed up in democratic and populist language but it was essentially a fight over the spoils of the system, not any fundamental reform. You always had a few, but no. There is a very different tone and content to politics in Pakistan than in India.

Q: India seems to have taken very well to British labor class rhetoric and all that. I take it that it did not do so in Pakistan.

THIBAULT: No, that had limited resonance in Pakistan, other than periodic populist spasms by the Pakistan People's Party founded by Bhutto and now identified with his daughter. On the other hand, if you're implying by that a pro-private enterprise rhetoric, no, that didn't exist, either. It was "who's on top and who's getting what out of the system." That's really what it boiled down to.

Q: Did you find yourself dealing, in a way, as an American officer, not extremely well paid, were you dealing with sort of the glitterati of the Pakistan class, both in Karachi and Lahore? Did this rub the wrong way sometimes or not?



THIBAULT: No. We circulated at all levels. In Karachi, the consul general's residence has to be seen to be believed. It was the ambassador's residence before the embassy move to Islamabad and a very nice home, by any standard. I was in the DCM residence, the former DCM residence, also a nice home by any standard, especially in Pakistan. No, that was never an issue. Nor in Lahore, where I had a very nice residence. Again, these are very status oriented societies. Foreigners, whatever their economic and social situation at home, are immediately admitted, given pretty free access. And if you're a senior U.S. government official in their country, you have access to just about anyone you want and you're invited constantly, because you'll add to the status of your hosts by accepting their invitation and attending their function. I should add that some of that mentality also exists among American hosts in Washington. Now, if I had been like the chargé d'affaires of a certain European country in Guinea, I mention this as an anecdote, whose official car was a Volkswagen Beetle, complete with flag, and where he would pull up to a reception or a government ministry, his driver would then run out and open the door for him on the other side, then you become a bit of a joke. But I had a very nice Buick, heavily armored. We had 19 people, retainers, at the consul general's residence, if you add the cooks and the gardeners and the security people and you name it.

Q: Well, after this modest life you were living, in '88 whither?

THIBAULT: Let me just conclude by, as I mentioned, days after Karachi there was the attack on the Pan Am plane. Within a month or so of my departure from Lahore there was a terrible tragedy in which Ambassador Raphel and President Zia died in a plane crash, having taken off from Lahore airport. There was much speculation that there had been some kind of tampering with the engine, that this was a planned assassination. But having very, very frequently seen the Pakistani presidential aircraft and the way in which it would land and without any real maintenance or attention then take off again, and it was not a new aircraft, it didn't surprise me that the Pakistani government has always claimed it was mechanical difficulty. That was a very credible account to me, rather than some convoluted explanation otherwise.



From Lahore I was then assigned to Kathmandu, Nepal as DCM. I was there from '88 to '91. I was selected by Ambassador Milton Frank, who was a political appointee who wanted someone who knew the region. The Department had proposed a number of candidates and he had narrowed them down to three or four and interviewed me in the State Department cafeteria in Washington and we immediately clicked. So he selected me to be his DCM. To me it was a great opportunity to build on my previous management experience to become a DCM, although at the time people told me, cautioned me, "You're spending too many years in South Asia. In fact, you've been overseas now since '79. Here it is 1988, nine years. You should think of a Washington assignment and you should start thinking of other regions than just South Asia." I had been told that earlier, even before going to Lahore. I didn't disregard that advice lightly but I've always been a great believer that there's, in a sense, a larger scheme of things and it's impossible, at least I have so found, to game the system. You think you're structuring your career path in a certain way and there's so many ways in which it can be thrown off. So you respond to the opportunities that are given to you as they come along. It was in that spirit that I sought the job and was happy to receive it.

So I was there from '88 to '91 as DCM. First with Ambassador Frank, who was a Ronald Reagan appointee. He had been the public affairs or relations officer for the University of California system, not just an individual campus like Berkeley or UCLA but for the system as a whole and had been on the margins of the Reagan kitchen cabinet in California politics. He was a former air force officer, a career air force officer and in fact had served in the India-Burma-China theater back in the 1940's, as a pilot flying the famous Hump. That's what interested him in coming back to the region and he was able to land the Nepal job as ambassador. But it was in the final year of the Reagan Administration. As I said, this was in '88. The election occurred in that year and President Bush '41 was elected. Ambassador Frank tried valiantly to remain on as ambassador. After all, he was a Republican and it was another Republican administration but it doesn't work that way in Washington. I won't go into the ins and outs, although if you're interested I can. But he was not successful in getting that extension and so he left after only one year. Ambassador Julia Chang Bloch, also a Republican political appointee, became ambassador.

Q: Also from California.



THIBAULT: Also from California. A very interesting, impressive lady with whom I worked very closely. She was the first Asian-American ambassador ever and was very proud of that fact. She had been born in China, come at the age of eight or nine to the United States. She was a political appointee, and I think her ties are to Senator Mitch McConnell, her sponsor, guru if you will, from Kentucky and her husband is a well to do businessman, based here in Washington. But, in fact, she had considerable relevant experience. She had previously been a Peace Corps volunteer in Malaysia, worked on the Hill, but then beginning with Reagan through Bush, she had become over a period of eight years a senior administrator in Peace Corps, area director in USIA, and an assistant administrator for Asia in AID. So it was not as if she had no foreign affairs experience.

Q: And especially, those particular organizations had ...

THIBAULT: Active programs in Nepal, exactly.

Q: This was serious stuff in Nepal.

THIBAULT: And she was a serious person. So State was just the most recent of her foreign affairs agencies, if you will. So those were the two ambassadors I worked for there.

Q: What was the situation in Nepal at the time, in '89, was it?

THIBAULT: I arrived in '88 and left in '91. The major event of that period, and it was a protracted process, was the shift from direct royal autocracy to democratically elected government. It did not happen easily, it did not happen overnight but fortunately it happened with very little violence, in fact with almost none and with the U.S. government and Ambassador Bloch in particular playing a very helpful, very constructive role, very supportive role. This is something we supported, at the same time, without the king being humiliated or his role in Nepalese society being significantly undermined. So it was a very careful balancing act. At the time it appeared to be a very successful transition. Things have happened since then that have brought out the weaknesses, especially among the democratic parties but also in the monarchy but at the time it was a great accomplishment.

Q: You served in Sri Lanka, you served in India, you served in Pakistan. How did you find the Nepalese people, the society with which you were dealing. Was this a different breed of cat?



THIBAULT: It was a different breed of cat in several ways. First and foremost, Nepal has always been an independent country. It was never colonized. They're very proud of that. It did not have the institutional infrastructure that, for all of its shortcomings, for example in Pakistan, is still quite meaningful which the British created in the other countries. That is in Bangladesh, in Sri Lanka, in India, and in Pakistan, all areas which the British controlled. They did not have that experience. The monarchy is also the same family who were the creators of today's Nepal, having been in power for over 250 years, the same ruling family. It is different also in that Nepal is a Himalayan country. That's important because ethnically you have a mixture of Indian Hinduindeed, Hinduism is the state religion - and Mongoloid groups in which there is also a significant Buddhist element and a Tibetan element. Tibet has always been an important neighbor for Nepal. There is also the Tibetan cultural influence and Tibetan physical presence as well, through the refugees from Tibet. That Tibetan Buddhism is very different from the Buddhism I encountered in Sri Lanka.

Nepal is very different too in that the army, maybe this is what makes it a little closer to Pakistan, but the army always has played a traditionally important role. The country is different also in that the social class that has dominated Nepal for many generations is very narrowly based and there is a big gap between the Hindu castes and a very large percentage of the population who are of Mongoloid, semi-Tibetan people. The famous Sherpas who lead people up Mount Everest are from that background. Many of your so-called Gurkha soldiers from Nepal are of that background also. The country is different, also, from the others in that there's only one significant city and that's Kathmandu. So Kathmandu dominates Nepal and always has dominated it since unification of Nepal in the late 18th century. Nepal is also different in that, as their expression puts it, they are between a rock and a hard place. Kathmandu is about five hours by road from India and about four and a half to five hours by road from China. So it's squeezed historically, culturally, linguistically. It's placed between two enormous neighbors, China and India, and has to be very mindful of its relations with both countries. So all of these factors add up to make it very separate, very distinct from the other countries of the Subcontinent. And finally and most obviously to Americans, it's very much a mountain dominated country. The Himalayas are there, the world's highest mountains.

Q: I've talked to people who served in the Peace Corps there and say, "You get out of Kathmandu and you take maybe a bus to someplace and then you walk for three days." In other words, an awful lot of villages are out there which

THIBAULT: And that points to another difference between Nepal and others, and that's the infrastructure is woefully inadequate, especially roads, communications, transportation, compared to the others.



Q: Just out of curiosity, I'm a military history buff. The Gurkhas have always fascinated me. They have been, still are, I guess, a part of the British Army. One, was this a term, I understand many of the men would come back and retire there. And do they represent a class or group apart or something?

THIBAULT: The word Gurkha refers to one of the regions of Nepal and it's the initial, core region of Nepal. The royal family, the current royal family, is descended from the ruler of Gurkha, which is a district of Nepal. So it's from that root that Nepalese soldiers have been known as Gurkhas. Now the British came in contact with the Gurkhas in the early 19th century, when they were fighting wars in northern India and were impressed by their martial qualities. The actual fighting men, not necessarily the officers, are Himalayan tribal people with very distinct Mongolian features. The officer class tends to be Hindu. These other ethnic groups are known as the Gurungs, the Tamangs, there are a number of them. The British maintained a "resident" or representative in Kathmandu, where the Indian embassy and the British embassy are now co-located, sharing that whole compound which the two governments divided in 1947. The British had an agreement with the government of Nepal where they could recruit Gurkha soldiers. And they maintained a recruiting base, which is still there in Kathmandu. The British officers would go out into the hills, as you say, on foot, and sign up young men. And often it became a family affair, but it tended to be from these particular social and tribal groups, not from others in Nepalese society. They're still recruited by the British Army and by the Indian Army, far more significantly by the Indian Army which has several divisions made up of Gurkhas. There were about 15 regiments in 1947 of the Indian Army that were Gurkha soldiers at the end of World War II. And the British and Indian governments divided them among themselves. The British kept two or three of them and the Indians took the rest. To this day there are Gurkha regiments in both armies. To this day, many of these people come back to Nepal, but increasingly today when their enlistment expires from the British Army they are hired by private security companies.

Q: I know. One of our colleagues, Tom Boyatt, I don't know if you know Tom but he was the head of AFSA. He runs an outfit that hires Gurkhas to protect banks and things like that.

THIBAULT: I saw them in Saudi Arabia. They're well recruited for that, heavily recruited. They're in Baghdad also, I mean in Iraq also.

Q: We really talked about the situation in Nepal but we haven't talked about the work of the embassy.



THIBAUT: We had a high profile and our presence in Nepal was extremely important to the Nepalese as a symbol of our commitment to their independence and sovereignty. . The neighboring presence of India and China is always a matter of great immediacy to the Nepalese. There's a statement, I can't recall whether I quoted it and I'm only paraphrasing it, but it's much more pithily stated by the founder of the Nepalese kingdom, in which he said, "Nepal was like a piece of bread sandwiched between two giant neighbors." As I say, he put it much more elegantly but you get the point. So our presence mattered a lot to them, as a balance if nothing else. They welcomed the other embassies as well, of course, but we were not just any outside power but the preeminent superpower. This was in the terminal phase of the Soviet Union and so the Soviet presence, which was never very important in any event in Nepal, was not of momentous concern to them.

We also had significant activities that we supported there. An aid program, an AID mission that was large. We have a vibrant Peace Corps presence as well that had a remarkable impact at the village level, where those volunteers were stationed. So the commitment that the United States demonstrated through its presence and programs, and through having an activist ambassador like Ambassador Bloch, to the sovereignty and independence of Nepal was absolutely vital. I'll get to how this became important in a practical sense, not just as an abstract concept of international law. We had a very immediate access to the top leadership of the Nepalese government. The Nepalese were very mindful of any statements that we might make about them. Now, getting Washington's attention to Nepal, of course, was another matter. That was never easy. Nepal's a very small country, and so to get the attention of policy makers, not just for Nepal but for any country of that stature or lack thereof, is a challenge. But having an ambassador like Ambassador Bloch certainly helped, no question about it.

Q: Could you tell us about how she operated. One of the things being, this was a time when we weren't sending as many woman ambassadors as we do now and in a traditional kingdom like that, how was that? Firstly, how did sort of the gender thing work but also, how did she operate?



THIUBAULT: Well, as I think I mentioned, she had had considerable Washington experience, although she was a political appointee. Through the eight years of the Reagan Administration she had been a senior official of USIA, of the Peace Corps, and of AID. She was an assistant administrator for AID, for Asia, before she came to Kathmandu. So she wasn't a babe in the woods and she had been on the Hill as well, so she knew the congressional dimension to this. She knew how the foreign policy system worked. More important, she had well-honed instincts and acutely developed political antennae, unlike Ambassador Frank who, though a very nice person, did not have that experience. All this proved invaluable at a time of crisis. I think also that her personality, and just her character, were such that she was not a person you could ignore. Gender was never an issue in terms of access. In South Asia, I've never found that to be a major problem, including in Pakistan, a Muslim country. It's another matter in the Middle East, perhaps, but not in South Asia. So she very quickly established her credentials and as I say was able to play an active role.

At the same time, Nepal itself was undergoing great stress. Beginning in 1990, the system there, the so-called Panchayat system, essentially of appointed officials, that is appointed by the king, responsible to the king, came under severe challenge from pro-democratic forces, led by the Nepali Congress, which is a political party modeled on the Indian Congress, with which it had had ties for many years. There were increasingly numerous and growing demonstrations aimed at mobilizing public opinion around the idea of forcing the King to adopt democratic concepts and institutions. These were events that were sometimes marked by clashes with the police and rapidly spread around the country. They attracted U.S. and international media attention via the Delhi-based bureau chiefs who came to Kathmandu to report on them. The royal establishment, or the Palace, as everyone called it, became very anxious to explain to us what its approach was, sometimes voicing their suspicion that the Indian, through their ties with the Nepali Congress, might be fomenting unrest. I should add that we saw no evidence of the latter; there was every sign that these events were strictly Nepalese in character.



It was a defensively motivated dialogue, with the Nepalese anxious to make sure that Washington understood their perspective. We saw the individuals and groups who organized the agitation as legitimate democratic groups. We knew them well. I often had Bhattarai and Koirala, NC party leaders who later became Prime Ministers, to my house for breakfast before they got caught up in meeting with their activists. At the same time, I had very close links with the King's senior adviser and, indeed, sheltered him at home for a couple of nights as he hid from mobs roaming his section of the city. These contacts gave the United States and the ambassador in particular the opening to promote dialogue between the Palace and the parties, to urge peaceful accommodation, which we then implemented, not only in the form of public statements in which we encouraged the democratic process; not only in terms of giving private advice to both sides, that is to the Palace and to the political parties; but also in terms of providing AID-sponsored, AID-funded programs that brought in American specialists on constitution writing, for example, legal systems and the like. Now, this is commonplace today, speaking in 2005 but I'm not sure it was quite as prevalent a practice back then but we put it into place in Nepal, again led by the Ambassador, who because of her command of the bureaucratic process, of AID's package of programs and money that could be tapped, and of individuals in Washington, could get a hearing on this and could certainly make a valid case. So all of that helped define the approach that we followed.

I should add, too, that just being in contact with leaders of the opposition was a specific decision we had to make. In other words, as often is the case in authoritarian systems, you had to consider the impact on the local establishment of being in touch with individuals and maintaining a dialogue with individuals who were dedicated to overthrowing that establishment. Now these were not revolutionaries, as the current Marxist terrorist, almost terrorist, group is that we read about in the papers occasionally when news of Nepal is reported. Yesterday or two days ago they blew up a bus. Today I see in the Post they issued an apology. Thirty five people were killed in the meantime. An honest mistake! That stream of political thinking was very recessive at the time.

Also, we had to consider the signal conveyed to the followers of these parties by having the American ambassador or the deputy chief of mission, my job, meeting with people who, in many cases, have been in jail for many, many years. The Ambassador's meeting with Ganesh Man Singh, the grand old man of Nepalese parties and leader of the Nepali Congress, who had been jailed by the king for well over 20 years, was a major event. So this was a period of ferment for us. Our objective was to encourage the process to be resolved, as I say with a democratic outcome but in a peaceful manner and reflective of the democratic values that these political groups claimed to espouse. And we worked overtime to influence King Birendra and his entourage and the Royal Nepalese Army, which was very loyal to the monarchy, to bend and to negotiate into being a new system which would have room for them. And you know, it worked. The Nepalese themselves deserved all of the credit, a positive commentary on their political values, but we had reason to be proud of what we had done on the margins. Needless to say, we had excellent relations with the new government that then took office in 1990.



One of the striking features of Nepalese politics, I don't know about today but certainly then, is that the established political parties, the Nepali Congress in particular but even the Communists, were committed to maintaining the monarchy. And the reason for this is that they saw the king as the symbol that helped keep the country together and as a symbol of Nepalese identity and distinctiveness with regard to India. That was very important to them. This was the king, Birendra, who was assassinated by his own son several years ago, the crown prince, in a terrible, terrible incident at the palace. Mother and father and other family members were murdered, and finally the crown prince turned the gun on himself. But Birendra, who was much shrewder than his brother, the current monarch, the king was receptive to this approach and, again, we worked hard to influence the thinking of the royal palace. Many of the advisors to the king were sophisticated men who were widely traveled. Keep in mind that the Nepali elite are all English speaking. Many of them, most of them, have been educated in India, with some also in Britain, including Birendra, and some even in the United States. So they reflected to a greater extent than one might imagine a shared set of values, as well. But a key to their thinking was the notion of maintaining Nepalese identity and independence because the great fear of Nepal has been, presumably still is, and always will be, being swallowed up by India.

Q: Did you find, as you were trying to promote this peaceful transition to a democratic government, what was the role of the Indian embassy or high commission?

THIBAULT: It is the Indian embassy there; Nepal is not a member of the Commonwealth, so it would be the Indian embassy. Actually they were very helpful and we remained in close contact so that Delhi would have no misunderstanding of our activities and objectives. We wanted thereby to make sure that the Indians did not interpret our activities as aimed at undercutting them in their backyard. India is a democratic country itself. They have always stated that they recognize Nepal's independence. Their concern was with Chinese influence in a country that they regard as within their sphere of influence and that is important to their security in the Himalayas. So they watched the Chinese role in Nepal closely and tried to offset it, particularly at that time. I don't know if that's still the case. I assume to some extent it is. There was never any suggestion that the Indians had designs on Nepalese independence and, as I say, they themselves had extensive contacts throughout Nepalese society and politics. It would have been astonishing if it had been otherwise, given how closely the two countries are intertwined. I knew that. In fact, the Indian ambassador was my former professor and research supervisor when I was a student in India, and his officers were excellent people. So we worked closely together, along with the British and others. So it wasn't that we were pitted against the Indians or anyone else. We were all, in a sense, singing from the same sheet of music. No one wanted to see instability and a breakdown of public order in Nepal. That would be disastrous, not only for the Nepalese but for India itself. It would create a vacuum for the Chinese and so forth. So I don't want to leave any suggestion that we were at odds with the Indians. Quite the contrary.



Q: How about the Chinese?

THIBAULT: The Chinese were, they were sort of like Banquo's ghost in Hamlet. In other words, they played very little overt role, but everyone was wondering what in fact it was. But again, the Chinese line was that they had no designs on Nepali independence. They recognized Nepalese borders. Their concern was and had been with the impact of Tibetan exiles and refugees, large numbers of whom lived in Nepal, on what might be occurring in Tibet itself. So I think they tracked that issue very closely. But we saw very little evidence, at least that I can recall, of the Chinese in any way meddling or interfering in Nepalese internal politics. But we did not have the contact and communication with them that we did, as I say, with the Indians and with others. Still, I was invited regularly to the Chinese Embassy for private dinners (wonderful food, I should add!) as they sought to learn how much we knew.

Q: What was the Nepalese government doing about the Tibetan refugees?

THIBAULT: The Tibetans had, the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959, I believe, fled to India, having passed through Nepal. Tens if not hundreds of thousands of Tibetans followed him over the years. Today there are very large Tibetan exile communities in India and the Dalai Lama maintains his headquarters in Dharamsala, in the Indian Himalayas, not far from the Nepalese border. The Nepalese wanted the Tibetans to pass through freely, wanted the Tibetans to leave as quickly as possible. Many of them did and some of them didn't. In the Kathmandu valley there were several, there are a number of Tibetan temples and communities there. Actually they have been quite helpful to Nepal's economy because they really started what is now a major export, which is fine quality hand-woven rugs that appeal very much to the interior design community. And we would have periodic discussions, shall we say, with the Nepalese over incidents that we would hear about in which Nepalese authorities turned Tibetans away at the border or sent them back to Tibet into Chinese hands. And the human rights community here in the United States and the pro-Tibetan lobby, which is very large and very vocal and very influential in the United States and has been since the Dalai Lama's exile, within hours would hear of these incidents in the remote mountains. They would inform the State Department which would alert the embassy and we, of course, would do our best to investigate these incidents. We maintained a dialogue with the Nepalese on their approach to, and handling of, Tibetans. Not only we Americans but others as well, especially the UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees) office in Kathmandu.

Q: How did the Nepalese government respond? You complain and they say, "Okay, you take them!" or something like that?



THIBAULT: They would say, "We don't know about these incidents and we'll investigate them. They may have happened in remote areas and we haven't been informed." And that had some credibility, in the sense that Nepal is a country with few roads and where communications are poorly developed. So that had some plausibility. Mostly, I have to say, it was a positive treatment. There were well known Tibetan handlers in Kathmandu and there was a well established bus route to India. UNHCR had a presence, that is the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, had a presence in Kathmandu and they would ensure the flow of refugees once they got to Kathmandu. That was the question. Once they got to Kathmandu they were in pretty good shape and they could move on to India pretty easily. But at the border areas, which are mountainous and often snow covered and the like and at a very high altitude, you never knew what was going on up there. That said, relatively few were detained and turned over to the Chinese.

Q: Was the embassy tasked with keeping an eye on developments in Tibet? In other words, were you a listening post? You were the nearest post to Tibet.

THIBAULT: No, no, we never played that role. In fact, travel by Americans to Tibet, even then, was relatively routine. You could take bus routes, you could take a bus from Kathmandu to Lhasa. So it's not as if Tibet was sealed off. Later on, must have been after I departed Nepal, they introduced air service between the two towns. No, we were never tasked with monitoring Tibetan developments.

Q: Which would basically consist of debriefing

THIBAULT: No, no, no, let me put it this way, no element of the mission had that responsibility or tasking and I would have known.

Q: Well then, what about errant Americas of one stripe or another?



THIBAUT: Just as a note, I don't want to let my discussion of the Indians pass without reference to a major problem that did develop, which illustrated the concerns that the Nepalese had, and again the interplay of Chinese and Indians. In order to demonstrate their independence, if you will, from the Indians and just their general independence, the Nepalese contracted to buy small arms from China during the time that I was there. This must have been in early '89 because Ambassador Frank was still there. Remember, before Ambassador Bloch, who arrived in 1989, there was Ambassador Milton Frank for a year, in the last year of the Reagan Administration. So they bought small arms from the Chinese. This greatly upset the Indians, who as I say watched the Sino-Nepalese relationship extremely closely. I got, from my counterpart in the Indian embassy, advance notice that the Indians would not stand by and let this pass and that Rajiv Gandhi, who was then the Indian prime minister, was personally engaged with this issue and acting under the advice of some of his advisors who advocated a kind of blockade. They wanted to bring home to the Nepalese that they had crossed the red line, if you will. So I reported this to Washington, but neither they nor our embassy in Delhi took it seriously. But within a matter of two or three weeks, the Indians imposed a fuel blockade on Nepal. And the importance of this to the Nepalese economy is explained by the fact that they are very dependent on the port of Calcutta. They are a landlocked country and they depend on the port of Calcutta and their well-established shipping routes for their imports, including oil products, from Indian refineries primarily. And the Indians cut that off which within a very short period of time brought the Nepalese economy to its feet. In the embassy, for example, we all rode around on bikes. The ambassador used his car, an armored car, minimally. Fortunately, Kathmandu was a relatively small place, so you could get around on foot or on bike more easily than you might in some other places.

But it was a major development and contrary to international law, which guarantees the rights of landlocked countries. Even in the worst times, when I was stationed in Pakistan, of Pak-Afghan relations, when the Soviets and their puppets were running the country and there were many suggestions to the Pakistanis that they put the squeeze on Afghan imports passing through the port of Karachi, they refused to do so, citing these provisions of international law. Now there were payoffs involved so I won't go into that, there are always wheels within wheels. So this was clearly illegal on the Indians' part, but yet that's how they acted, that's how they responded. And eventually, it was quietly lifted after a few weeks. But the Nepalese had gotten the point and there were no further arms purchases from the Chinese. So there was a very real basis for Nepalese fears about protecting the substance of their independence and sovereignty under Indian pressure, actual or potential.



Now you were asking about errant Americans. This was a constant concern. The consular section, in size, is probably no larger than any other section in a post of equivalent size but it certainly had unique challenges. Previously, that is in the Seventies, Nepal was known for the hippie tourist trade and easy access to drugs and the like, which drew a very, let's put it this way, interesting mixture of people but didn't generate much income for the country while at the same time generating a lot of notoriety. The Nepalese government in the early Eighties really began to clean up its act, kick these people out, prevent them from coming in and began to encourage, very strongly, nature and adventure tourism and they were very successful at this. They had a major new airport, which the Japanese had built, and the Airbuses would come in from Japan, Europe and from the United States, bringing well heeled would-be adventurers who were there to explore the Himalayas and in many cases do some mountain climbing. It was a major source of income and of employment. There were many trekking agencies in Kathmandu and they were very generous with work permits and residence permits for foreigners in Kathmandu. So there was always, as part of this, a free-floating community, if you will. There were always a certain number of Americans, a lot of them from the West Coast. So this was a large part of our consular clientele.

What would often happen is that people would come in having perhaps two weeks or three weeks maximum to spend in the country and would immediately set out to climb in the Himalayas which are spectacularly beautiful. I've never seen a country as gorgeous as Nepal, from that perspective. And as I mentioned you had a very well developed infrastructure of guides and Sherpas, human caravans who would carry everything with and for you, at every price range. People poured in to do this trekking. Most of them had a great time and left safely and there was no problem. But there were a number who were not as successful. So word would come to us that they had run into trouble and we would have to try to do our best, first of all, to find out what had happened and to mobilize support for them, in many cases. These also included people who had died while they were engaged in climbing, often of mountain sickness, which if I understand it correctly results from climbing high altitudes too quickly without a period of adaptation.

Q: Almost like the reverse of the bends?



THIBAUT: Yes, that's exactly it. It affects you in the cranial area. People would come having climbed in the Rockies or in South America and feel that they were experienced climbers. But there's a world of difference between climbing at the 12 to 14 or 15,000 foot level and climbing at the 18, 19, 20, 21, 22 and 23,000 foot level. Having only a relatively short amount of time, they would push the envelope. Mountain sickness can strike you regardless of physical condition, regardless of age, regardless of gender. It's totally egalitarian, if you will. Not everyone is affected, most are not. But many are. And the only answer to it, and it's a very effective one, is to descend very rapidly. And it usually hits you at the 12 to 14,000 foot range. One of its hallmarks is to become disoriented. So others will see you reflecting the symptoms of it, which include confusion and irrationality and you can't be talked into doing what is the right thing. You don't recognize it. So we had a number of people who would die there and the embassy would try to make sure that, among other things, the remains could be shipped home.

We were perhaps the only embassy in the world, at least that I'm aware of, that had a little morgue of its own. We had, in the Recreation Association area, we had a refrigerating unit with these coroner's shelves and you could stack people up. Of course, Americans were not the only victims of this and so you would get pleas from your colleagues at other missions, we have a Brit or Japanese or Norwegian or whatever and could you help store him there. Sometimes the units would be empty and you'd say, "Sure!" and then two days later an American would arrive and be stacked. I don't want to sound ghoulish about it but this is one of the realities. The other thing is that there were no embalming facilities because in Nepal, Hindu culture, you cremate within 24 hours. So there was a professor of anatomy in the medical school in Kathmandu who had been sent for technical training, not in his field, by one of the European countries, but in embalming techniques. That must have been a rather unique aid program, so that he could be called on if appropriate.



The most dramatic instance that I recall was getting word that a young American of Asian descent from San Francisco had died. He was only 21. Of course, one of the most distressing responsibilities of a consular officer anywhere is to inform a family in the event of death of an American citizen. So our consul called to tell them that he had received this news. Of course, the parents were heartbroken, this was their only child, but they very much wanted to have his remains sent home. Our consular officer, Charles Parrish, said he'd see what he could do. He and other consular officers would go out, sometimes for two to three weeks at a time, trekking in the Himalayas, to be in touch with police officials, with medical people, with the trekking companies, with the rest houses, the guesthouses, the restaurants and so forth that sort of populated the trail. Charles, a former Marine, set out with his FSN. He said, "I'm going in that area, I've got a trip scheduled. Let me see what I can do." He had been told that the body of the young man had been buried under rocks along the trail so as to protect the remains against animals who might prey on them. So he had an idea of where the body was. It was about 13 to 14,000 feet high altitude. He went to the nearest source of kerosene, bought a can of kerosene which he put on his back and carried up to the site where the young man's remains had been buried. And he uncovered them and cremated the body there; this was in a driving snowstorm, he told me later. When they had been cremated thoroughly he gathered up the ashes, he had a receptacle for those and brought them down again and was able to send them to the young man's family and of course they were very grateful for that. I remember writing this up in Charles' EER, reflecting the spirit of the consular section; he was the section head in Nepal.

But we had many accounts. A bus would fall off the trail and passengers would be killed and would include some Americans and their bodies would be retrieved, carried back to Kathmandu for storage in that refrigerated unit. So it was a challenge.

Unlike some other countries, where you were constantly dealing with largish numbers of visa seekers, young men, most of whom you had to be doubtful of their intention to return to their country, we had relatively few Nepalese visa seekers of that type, other than the normal flow of students and business people, government officials, people with families and so forth. And very few, virtually no, Nepalese overstayed their visas. So that was a pleasant change for me, having been in Lahore, in Pakistan, where we were flooded with dubious visa applicants. So American citizen services was really the core of the consular section's work.

Q: There were two major international events that happened during your time. One was the fall of the Berlin Wall and all the satellites, the changes there. The other one was the Gulf War. Did either of those play much?



THIBAULT: I have to say that the fall of the Berlin Wall did not have much local effect, except, of course, for the German embassy, because the East Germans had a mission there as well, and it put the Communist Party, and the communists had always been a strong factor in Nepalese politics, put them on the defensive. Other than that, no, I would not say that the changes in Europe in a place as distant as Nepal with its own concerns, and a tremendously inward-looking focus on their own domestic upheavals, that that was really a major event for them, at least as I recall.

So far as the Gulf War was concerned, we went into overdrive, that is the mission did, in making sure that we explained to Nepalese public opinion the background and the response by the United States, leading the international community, to Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait. As you can imagine, there was no sympathy for Saddam and Iraq in a country like Nepal, which saw itself like Kuwait in the shadow of much larger neighbors. And the Muslim population there is miniscule, so that there wasn't an Islamic dimension to this. And then, of course, the British contingent included Gurkhas. The British maintain an active recruiting center in Kathmandu and ties between the Royal Nepalese Army and the British Army go back generations. So it was a very positive understanding, abetted by the support extended by the whole international community and the United Nations. There were no points of contention there over the Gulf War.

Q: At the embassy, what, obviously you're a Subcontinent hand, the Indian embassy, what were you getting from them on the Gulf War?

THIBAULT: I really, I find that a hard question to answer. My recollection is that the Indian position was not critical of the United States. We had some overflight issues and there were some elements in the Indian political environment who were critical. But I don't recall that these really intruded much into how the Indians conducted themselves in Nepal on this issue. It didn't register with me at the time, at least.

Q: Was there much contact with the Chinese?

THIBAULT: We were on friendly terms, we were on friendly terms. Tiananmen Square occurred during this period, June of '89, so for a time there was a lack of communication and contact with them. But we really didn't, I can't say that we really spent much time with them, but it wasn't a hostile relationship. I've already noted my encounters with the Chinese embassy.

Q: Were there any other issues that involved you or the ambassador or the embassy?



THIBAULT: None that come to mind, beyond the ones you always have in managing programs and the like. But in terms of the type that we've talked about here, no, I can't think of any.\

Q: Did you find that the programs, between AID and what the embassy, sort of the State Department side of the embassy work, were they well coordinated?

THIBAULT: They occupied, the AID mission occupied, a building, a large building across town, so it wasn't that they were on the same compound as we, but for that matter this was also the case with USIS which had its own office as did the Peace Corps. So we were scattered around, even the medical unit was elsewhere. But at the same time, I would say that there was excellent coordination. The ambassador, having been an assistant AID administrator, obviously had a terrific grasp of AID programs, not only as an AID administrator, but as AID administrator for Asia as a whole. So she knew the AID side very, very well. She handpicked the director, Kelly Kammerer. Both he and his deputy, Stacey Rhodes, and I were all on very positive terms, so there was no friction and the AID mission was very responsive in shifting to new priorities in response to the political situation. So I would say that AID was a key element of the ambassador's strategy and of intra-mission cooperation. The same was also true of Peace Corps which had a very large program. Very good interpersonal relationships among myself, the Ambassador, and agency reps also helped considerably.

Q: Right now there's a very nasty Marxist movement going on in Nepal. Was that around at all?

THIBAULT: Only in the portions of Nepal that bordered on the state of West Bengal in India. Now West Bengal was and is the center of the communist movement in India. There's no question that in its more virulent phases Maoism had a certain appeal in Bengal and the Communist Party there split, as it did in many parts of the world, between the pro-Soviet and the pro-Chinese Marxists. The pro-Chinese Marxists had a following in the border areas adjacent to, as I say, West Bengal. It was probably a precursor of what we've seen subsequently but landlords were targeted. Some of them were beheaded. Others were just gunned down. But these were very distant echoes and you would hear about them or you heard about incidents like these that had happened even before my arrival. But the main communist group was a much more tame movement which had strong ties with, if you will, the establishment Communist Parties in India and they were distracted for a long time by the collapse in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union itself. So they were really on the fringes at that point, although some of their leaders were politicians of substantial stature in Nepal. But, as I say, this was still a very small cloud on the horizon and at the time no one would have guessed that it would evolve to where we are now.



Q: 1991, where did you go?

THIBAULT: In 1991, after 12 years abroad, I returned to Washington and I became director of the Office for Europe, Near East, South Asia and Latin America, quite a mouthful, in what was then called the Directorate (not Bureau) for Refugee Programs (RP). I was an FS-1. It was one of the few office director positions open to a One level officer. The main reason I think I was selected for that was because of my experience in Pakistan, where we, of course, were very well aware of the huge numbers of Afghan refugees who had come into Pakistan. At that time, the Pakistani refugee caseload, if you will, was the largest challenge and the largest call on RP resources. So they wanted someone who had some acquaintance with those issues. I recall making a trip to Pakistan at that time, visiting camps and meeting with the folks who dealt with refugee issues in Islamabad and Peshawar, Quetta and so forth.

Q: You were there from '91 to ...

THIBAULT: I was there from '91 to '93. It was located, not in Main State, but right across the street, at Columbia Plaza. The first director whom I worked for was Ambassador Princeton Lyman, followed by the late Ambassador Warren Zimmerman, both of them tremendous officers and great leaders. I have great respect for both of them. And then some great deputies, as well. Sarah Moten, with whom I worked very closely, was a political appointee, and then Brunson McKinley, who's now head of the OIM, the Organization of International Migration in Geneva, a UN body, and Priscilla Clapp. Brunson's a Foreign Service officer, who had been ambassador to Haiti and Priscilla Clapp had been DCM in Pretoria, I believe. Anyway, it was a great team and my colleagues in RP were first rate, as well. I look back on that experience with great fondness. Let me just say a word about RP because it was made up primarily of civil service folks who were mostly women and that combination, particularly the predominance of women, gave a different feel and different tone to the workings of the office, to the decision-making process. And I say this in the most positive way possible. There were several FSO's but as I say, it was predominately, I would say overwhelmingly, a civil service workforce in RP. The attraction for me to work there, in addition to the nature of the work, was also the management responsibilities.

My office which was, as I mentioned, Europe, Near East, South Asia and Latin America, had the budget, believe it or not, of \$350 million dollars. RP's budget is separate from that of the State Department. At that time, it totaled \$700 to \$800 million, a separate Congressional appropriation. We had to make our own case to the Congress for the resources that we needed. It is a bureau that works very closely with NGO's and with a whole host of organizations in the United States who support refugees and particularly support the resettlement of refugees. A number of them are church and religious groups, generally speaking. So it was a very different kind of experience for me and one that was extremely helpful, I think, in expanding my awareness of how government works.



I went in, as I mentioned, thinking that my focus would be on Afghan refugee issues and that always did remain a large part of my clientele, if you will. But the Gulf War, as you mentioned, had occurred just before I transferred. I left Nepal and then that summer I moved to Washington and began working in RP. And you may recall that in the wake of the Gulf War, there was a tremendous outflow of Kurds from northern Iraq into Turkey. I mean they just picked up and moved into Turkey and that was a major source of humanitarian concern and international attention and of focus by the United States government. RP is the bureau that is on the cutting edge of response to any humanitarian crisis and of course we have an unending supply of these. In part, not only is this so because of its mandate but also because it has its own budget and also it has its very well developed network of relationships with counterpart organizations at the national level, at the UN and international level, and at the domestic level. These are underpinned by the personal ties and continuity provided by civil service personnel who had managed their "accounts" for many years. And you can be very creative in moving funds and when I say creative, I say this in a positive way in responding quickly.

And so it's a great blessing for the Department that RP has its own budget, because there are few other pots of money to tap. I notice the President just announced yesterday that he would be increasing the U.S. commitment to Africa and this would be another \$650 million, if I read the article correctly. Where is that money going to come from? The Congress hasn't appropriated it yet, to my knowledge. Well, some of it will probably come out of RP and some of it is a question of the labels you apply to existing programs or the reshuffling or reallocation of priorities and resources. We had a decision making process within RP which met every week, all of us, chaired by the Director of RP, in which we went over each program - program by program - and it was a funding allocation process. We could be very nimble. It's a bureau which does not attract the attention, and particularly the recognition, it really deserves. When you have leaders of the caliber of Ambassador Lyman and Ambassador Zimmerman, men of great integrity and great experience and widely recognized as such, they could just cut through all kinds of problems. Of course, having these resources meant the top level of the Department would often turn to them, too. So it was a source of unhappiness that RP at that time was not recognized as a separate Bureau. The head was known as the director of RP as opposed to an assistant secretary.

Q: RP stood for...

THIBAULT: Refugee Programs. This changed shortly after I left and it was elevated to bureau status, which it now has, of course, but somewhat expanded. It is now known as Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM.) There was a concern then that by adding population and migration, the emphasis on refugees, the core function, would get lost or diluted, and that perhaps some of the funding would go to other purposes, but I don't know what the facts are on that.



Q: You mentioned having civil servants, mainly women, gave an added boost. Give a little feel for why.

THIBAULT: There was an empathy for the refugee populations, which is very important. Also, as I said earlier, we worked very closely with NGO's and with a whole spectrum - you have no idea, I had no idea - of the groups out there in our own society, and I'm not talking about the international community, who are engaged in this humanitarian enterprise, if I may call it that very broadly. Many of them, many, many, many of them, are staffed and led by women also. Way out of proportion to what you might encounter, elsewhere, in other organizations. I don't want to fall into stereotypes. They could communicate at a level of mutual knowledge that arose from so knowing each other so well and for so long. Having civil service people was very important because that continuity was of critical importance. I can't let this session pass without mentioning my own deputy, Judy Chavchavadze, who died several years ago, who had been in RP for many years and was just a delightful person and an extremely competent person. The two of us worked very, very closely together. It was a great experience to be in that office. We started off, very shortly after I arrived, dealing with this Kurdish exodus issue. In connection with that, I accompanied the deputy RP director, Sarah Moten, on a trip to Turkey, to northern Iraq, then to Israel and Jordan, because we dealt with the Palestinians whom we were supporting, even going on to Saudi Arabia. So it was a new experience for me to travel to the Middle East which I didn't know at that time. And subsequently I made a number of trips to Geneva, to New York, to Rome and Paris and so forth, dealing with counterparts on these issues, traveling with Warren Zimmerman and others.

The Kurdish issue, one way or another, was resolved fairly quickly. Within a matter of four or five months most of the Kurds, who of course didn't receive a very warm welcome in Turkey, returned to northern Iraq once it was clear that the northern part of Iraq would be a zone protected by the United States. And if you recall then subsequently it really became quite independent of the rest of Iraq and we're living with the consequences of that today.



The major issue that then developed and which consumed a great portion of my attention was Bosnia in spring and summer 1992. As Yugoslavia collapsed we had the emergence of these new republics and, particularly in Bosnia, after it had declared independence, the murderous confrontations among the Croats, the Serbs and the Muslims, the Bosnian Muslims, Bosniacs, as they're called. The Bush administration's policy, such as it was, was not to intervene in any kind of forceful way but to sort of sit on the sidelines, wringing their hands and calling on all parties to behave properly. Absent a political, i.e. military, response, the real nub of US policy toward Bosnia was to fashion a humanitarian response and this is where RP played a key role, for the reasons that I've mentioned. It allowed the Bush and very soon thereafter the Clinton Administration to project itself as responding to the displacement and the devastation and the suffering and the killings that were being widely reported in the media by pointing to the money that we were spending to assist refugees. And again, RP was the source of those funds. Beginning in '92 we had an interagency coordination process, led by the NSC and would have videoconferences every day or every other day, as well as meetings with Under Secretary Kantor, who was under secretary for political affairs, virtually every day in his office. Bosnia was an all-consuming issue for the Department and for the administration and we were thrust right in the middle of this. And of course because what had until that time been an appendage for my particular office, which I'll mention again was Europe, Near East, South Asia and Latin America, Europe suddenly for the first time in forty years became of significance in the RP context. I wasn't the point man on this because the Director became so, but I was certainly heavily engaged in the policy process.

Q: You were there during a change in administrations, '91 to '93, the Clinton Administration came in '93. Was there a change in looking at the Bosnian tragedy, it wasn't just Bosnia at that time, it was Croatia, crises, between the two administrations?

THIBAULT: There was little to differentiate the Bush Administration's handling of Yugoslavia and the republics from Clinton's. Events in Bosnia gathered momentum after the elections. The focus certainly was there in the Clinton Administration but the policy of non-involvement was maintained. The coordinator for this interagency process was Nancy Soderberg, who then became an ambassador under Clinton to the UN.

Q: Well, on both, there was this tremendous aversion to direct intervention.

THIBAULT: Aversion to taking any kind of military action. Both Secretaries Baker and Christopher shared that view, strongly backed by the Pentagon. No one wanted to be sucked in to any commitment of U.S. military forces in the Balkans. The same was very true of the Europeans.



Q: Well then, what were you doing in the Bosnia thing?

THIBAULT: I should mention that I made several trips to Croatia and into Bosnia, as well, to see for myself, to meet with our partners, and to document how our resources were being used. We don't send our own State Department people out there to directly provide assistance but we provide funding for organizations that do deliver humanitarian aid. To UN agencies and to experienced NGO's as well. Again, RP's job is not to send people over there. You might have a refugee coordinator. For example, in Islamabad where we had a refugee program of long standing, we had an officer who devoted himself or herself exclusively to refugees and to managing the refugee support programs. Our RP job was primarily to translate a U.S. policy decision into funding support, and to allocate that funding to whoever is going to deliver the assistance, and finally to monitor their performance.

Q: Could you talk a bit about your, not really evaluation but your feelings about effectiveness, the ease of dealing with, the problems with, some of the major groups that dealt, like the UN and some non-governmental organizations, I think of Doctors Without Borders.

THIBAULT: Yes, there are a number of them; Catholic Relief Service is another. I say flat out that they do a terrific job. I don't think most Americans fully appreciate the difficulties in the field and often the dangers that they face there as well. The logistical challenges that exist as well are often formidable. I really can't single out any as being less effective than others. I did not encounter that myself. My recollection is that they were operating under incredible difficulties in doing a job without having political tools with which to ameliorate the situation they were dealing with. In Bosnia, in particular, unlike some other refugee situations, the problem wasn't so much hunger or distress or lack of clothing or housing, it was the physical danger which vulnerable populations were facing. There's a very great limit on what these organizations can do to deal with that as we see daily in Iraq. They can only move into the limited openings that the participants in the fighting, if you will, the combatants, will permit them and maybe to create a space that will be respected by these combatants and then be able to reach populations. It's very easy to point a finger at them but, in my experience, they tend to be people of great experience, great commitment and imaginative in how they do their jobs. I have great respect for them.

Q: It was shown that in matters that took place somewhat after you left there, of what happened, to how vulnerable these populations



THIBAULT: Yes, the Srebrenica tragedy began to unfold when I was in RP. But there were less-publicized but well-known camps, mass murders, ethnic targeting. We had that information. The frustrating part of it was that reporting from the media, from intelligence sources, from other governments, from our own missions, was very comprehensive in describing what was happening, particularly to the Bosnian Muslims. And as I say, the administration was very reluctant to come to any kind of military assistance. Fortunately, under public pressure, this policy began to erode. I recall traveling to our air base in Germany, near Dusseldorf in early '93.

Q: Frankfurt-Wiesbaden, maybe Dusseldorf.

THIBAULT: It was a major air base in Germany. The Clinton administration was under tremendous pressure from public opinion and from the media and from the Congress here to respond more forcefully. Particularly to deliver foodstuffs to Bosnian Muslims who were surrounded by Serbs near Srebrenica. This was one area where providing foodstuffs and medical supplies and relief was a matter of life and death for these people. So rather than attempting any kind of land operation they decided to have an airdrop and use MREs, to deliver MREs.

Q: Meals Ready to Eat.

THIBAULT: Meals Ready to Eat, that's right. And I recall the NATO commander for southern Europe, based in Naples, whose name escapes me at the moment, I think he died shortly thereafter, flew up for the meeting with the planners, the intel folks, and the pilots. It was the last planning session for the first airdrops that were to begin that night. So I was, with a couple of colleagues, in the mission coordination center at the air base. And the guidelines for the pilots, all of whom were gathered there, were very explicit, that they were not to descend below 35,000 feet, so they would be out of reach of any kind of ground response from the Serbs. And the hope was that the parachutes, a sufficient number of them, would land in the right places. As it turned out, this was relatively effective. Most of them did land and reach the people they were supposed to reach. But over the long term it didn't make much difference as many of these people, especially the men, were rounded up and then shot by the Serbs, in spite of the presence of a Dutch battalion nearby which had been inserted there. So you could see this sort of creeping military response but just at the initial stages there.

Q: Were you getting, within the State Department, looking at this thing, were signs of, I won't say rebellion, but discontent? Warren Zimmerman, for example, was an old Yugoslav hand. He and I served together in Yugoslavia way back in the Sixties.



THIBAULT: He was, Warren was very critical of, I mean privately, of this approach. Many of us were very frustrated by it and I recall perhaps one or two resignations but on our side, we believed strongly in what RP was doing.

Q: I think there were three or something and these were people on the desk who'd been reading the reports. How about with the Middle East? What we were doing for the Palestinians, did sort of almost domestic American politics creep in there in that.

THIBAULT: The issue there was less domestic politics and more to do with the effectiveness of UNWRA (United Nations Works and Relief Administration) in supporting the Palestinians. I haven't thought about this in a long time but the UN... I say UN, it's administered by the UN but is supported by the international community, largely led by the US, the major donor then, which provided the funding that paid the salaries of the Palestinian administration, particularly for social services, including schools and medical clinics and the like. It was always a question of whether the funding commitments would be adequate to meet the needs. So aid for the Palestinians tended to be more a bureaucratic issue than one reflecting domestic political cross-currents. I think there was broad support for this program, as a means of keeping the Palestinians quiet, or phrased otherwise but also accurately, to indicate that our policy was not 100 percent unquestioned support of Israel. Cynicism aside, our funding and that of others made a huge difference to helpless people. And our travel was important. We could be a lot more persuasive if we had seen for ourselves what was being done with U.S. funding and then argue against cutbacks or budget freezes.

But nonetheless when you had conflicting demands on your budget and you needed to be responsive, you could make shifts pretty quickly, to ramp up to meet Bosnia, for example, though realizing that without a new appropriation often meant robbing Peter to pay Paul. I mean, where does the "new" money that the Secretary wants in a crisis situation come from? So you'd look at your existing pots of money. UNWRA might be vulnerable in that regard because it was a longstanding program; so were the Afghan programs. They had been in place a long time. Plans made to increase UNWRA's funding to reflect rising caseloads and costs might be shelved, with such funds being allocated to Bosnians or to Iraqi refugees in Saudi Arabia, including the establishment of new camps for them.



This bureaucratic process extended to the other dimension of RP's mandate beyond refugee assistance which was refugee resettlement. RP's total \$750 million budget included a very large amount for settlement in the U.S. of, notably, Vietnamese and some Cambodians. We were winding up the last of the Vietnamese refugees in places like Thailand and the Philippines and settling them in the United States. Not to mention Soviet Jews, Pentecostals, and other groups for whom there were specific quotas within the Congressional annual quota of, say 125,000 refugees entering the U.S. But you might have fewer Soviet Jews come in because of the collapse of the USSR; you might have fewer Vietnamese than anticipated, so that would open numbers to be allocated to other groups, along with funding to accompany the adjustment. You would have to consult with the committees over in Congress to do so. And then you would work with the resettlement agencies in the United States, many of which were religious in nature, who placed refugees in specific American communities and paid the costs associated with their move plus funding for housing and temporary support. That was a whole other dimension of RP that I was not involved in but was very aware of because all of us were so intertwined. I was in refugee assistance. That was refugee resettlement. Those were separate budgets within RP. As I say, beyond the high politics of the tragedies that created refugees, there was a lot of bureaucratic churning on these issues. That is what running a program, managing resources adds up to in contrast to the strictly policy offices who seemed to assume we could roll over and do their bidding. But that is how we would be brought into the inter-agency policy process. Believe me, it was a learning experience which made me appreciate the work of AID and others. Bringing money to the table makes you very attractive, I quickly learned.

Q: Latin America, was this still Central America?

THIBAULT: The ones that we dealt with were primarily Guatemalan refugees who were in southern Mexico. One of my officers went down there and visited their camps. There were a handful of others in Latin America, but that region was by far the smallest element in my portfolio.

Q: Your office didn't cover Africa.

THIBAULT: No.

Q: The Rwandan thing was later, I think.

THIBAULT: That's right.



Q: How about the relations, your bureau, sort of existing off there, were there much ties to the geographic bureaus or not?

THIBAUT: Well, of course you dealt with them, what I just called the policy offices, depending on the refugee issue in question. With Bosnia, it was EUR which played a prominent role in the Bosnian Working Group chaired by the NSC. I've also mentioned how Under Secretary Kantor chaired daily meetings on Bosnia in his office, where various bureaus were represented. IO, for example, was always a major player there because the Administration sought to thrust the UN into a leadership role. Often you would have POL-MIL, political military, because of the military dimension. INR would present the latest intelligence update. You would have the admin people because some of their assets, some of their equities, might be involved. So it was definitely a broad, inclusive process.

Q: Did you ever find in these meetings that, let's say on Bosnia, that RP, their office director was pushing to do more and the representation from the European bureau would say, "We have to go slow?"

THIBAUT: No. We had very close relations with EUR especially and with the others as well. As I say, you worked with these people fulltime, particularly with the EUR people. And again, we were at the working level, not at the policy making level. We were there to make sure that the programs that we, RP, were funding were working properly. Our role was important to them because for a very long time, the UNHCR and NGO's were all that we, the U.S., had going to address an unfolding tragedy that had caught the world's attention and that of the American public. We did not really get into these larger policy issues. Warren Zimmerman might be there on that. In addition to the meetings, you were on the phone with them, by e-mail and fax and all of that, throughout the day. So there was no gap there.

Q: You left in '93. How did you feel? I would think you would be somewhat disheartened about seeing what was happening in Bosnia.



THIBAULT: Particularly since you shift gears so abruptly. This is the nature of the assignment process for the Foreign Service, unlike the civil service. You work literally up to midnight of one day. Then you're out of it and someone else steps in and you immediately move on to something quite different. So there's a frustration there in not seeing a process or a decision through. There's no denying that I felt an anger that nothing more was being done. It was especially disheartening because the information on the Serbian atrocities was so clear, with visions of the Holocaust hanging over the reports of systematic ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, and yet the international community refused to act. The Europeans should be held more accountable than ourselves; after all, it was their region and their shared history. As I stated, I traveled to Bosnia, came under shell fire in Mostar as the Serbs on the surrounding hills sought to drive out the remaining Croats and Muslims, saw the public parks there full of Muslim graves, and heard first-hand accounts from victims of the Serbs. In that particular case you could see, as I mentioned with the example of the airdrops, you could see the administration beginning to change its approach, but it was agonizingly slow, as they began to bend to public pressure rather than acting on the basis of some reasoned policy change within the USG. Let me mention here, in this regard, that where you really felt the existing policy digging in, even at the working level, was on the DOD side particularly at the other daily meeting which was convened by videoconference and chaired by the NSC where you would have DOD, CIA, AID and others participating as well as State.

From RP I went to the United Nations in New York. I was the senior advisor for South Asia at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations. The South Asia bureau had just been created, broken off from NEA. Other bureaus had their own senior representatives or advisors as they were called. So I was selected for this. It was a three to four month experience between the beginning of September '93, let's say Labor Day, and the end of December, around Christmas. From there in January 1994, I went to the Board of Examiners for about six months, a most interesting experience. And from there, in August, I went into Arabic language training for a year at the National Foreign Affairs Training Center and then in the summer of '95 I went to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia as political counselor.

Q: Al, let's start with the first one of your assignments.



THIBAUT: Let me just correct, at the very outset, correct the title that I had for that brief period at the UN, which was not special representative but senior advisor. And as I mentioned there, I was one of several, each representing a different bureau in the Department. As the Bureau of South Asian Affairs had recently been formed, having been hived off from NEA, something which I parenthetically will say I highly applauded, the bureau decided it should also have a senior advisor there. I believe that there has been one there ever since. It's always during the General Assembly session in the fall. For those who have not had any experience at the UN, it's a marvelous experience and an opportunity to learn better the work of the United Nations, of the committees and of course to see U.S. policy at work there. To be candid, my responsibilities were not particularly onerous because the number of countries in the South Asia bureau is six. So unless issues arise affecting those six countries, it really boiled down to two, Pakistan and India. Afghanistan, of course, was also under the bureau's jurisdiction; nonetheless, at that time at least there was not an Afghan issue, or set of issues, during the brief time that I was there. So unless there are particular issues affecting the two countries one can have the time to explore the rest of the building, if you will, on the East River and become more broadly familiar with the work of the UN and with the mission, which is just across the street.

The Perm Rep at the time for the United States was Madeleine Albright, assisted by several officers having ambassadorial rank, all political appointees, as I recall. So I spent three or four months there, at the UN. I, of course, sat in on all the Mission-wide daily staff meetings. The most interesting dimension, both as I saw it at the time and in retrospect, since Ms. Albright then became Secretary of State and is now a prominent personality in her own right, was exposure to her style of guiding U.S. policy and managing the mission. So the day would begin with a general staff meeting to which, it seemed to me, virtually all employees at the mission were present, in a large room up on the seventh or eighth floor. She would be flanked by her ambassadors, who would then discuss among themselves the day's work or what was covered the previous day. There wasn't much interaction, as I recall, with those who were in attendance whose role seemed to be to observe all of this, but my memory may fail me. I'm sure there were comments and interjections and a role to be played in that by the counselors and anyone else who had something to contribute. After the meeting, then we would have, in my case, a meeting with the political counselor, a fellow by the name of Bob Gray, certainly his last name was Gray, who was a UN veteran. Then we would get into much more specific issues and of course review the Department's instructions and guidance and the interaction with the Department that had taken place the night before, the telegrams that had come in. Then we would fan out across the street to do whatever was needed.



One of the more unexpected duties, parceled out in the morning, was to decide who would occupy the U.S. seat or desk, whatever you want to call it. If you recall the layout of the General Assembly chamber, you have all of the member countries present, each one with a little name plate behind which the various delegates may sit. There's room for three or four of them. It was the mission policy at that time to make sure that the United States was constantly represented at all of the speeches that were given by the dignitaries who, in many cases, had made a special effort to fly in from their own countries to make their annual speech. When our President addressed the Assembly, these sessions were very well attended, and in general for very prominent and well known international figures, but most speakers attracted a perfunctory attendance. But the U.S. was always present, operating in the belief that our absence would be noted and that it would have greater weight with that country than the absence of some others. That was a responsibility that rotated among the officers of the mission, not to mention advisers like me, interns, and our so-called public members. Should I say fifth wheels?

You never hear about the public members of the US delegation to the UN latter but there are typically about six to eight at our Mission during the GA session, local citizens close to the White House. They don't have much to do but bask in the glory of representing the U.S. through their physical presence. In fact, the ones I met were nice, serious people but had no diplomatic experience or special knowledge. If nothing else, this kind of political patronage built up better understanding of the UN in their communities, I suppose. At the end of the day there would be a sort of a perfunctory reporting message that would summarize the statements made during the day. I say perfunctory, but it may well be that individual bureaus had an interest in the content of those speeches.

All this made for interesting scrap-book opportunities. To this day, I regret not following up with the photographers who lurked in the background recording x and y occupying the Perm Rep's seat in that august setting known around the world. What a great photo op! I heard of some colleagues who sent these off to their home-town papers and became minor celebrities.

Then of course there was the committee work, which was also interesting and a new experience for me. And that's where you would see, in my case, the Indians and the Pakistanis periodically clash on different issues. Of course, your other responsibility was to interact with the missions of these countries, making sure that you did not ignore the small countries. In my case, Nepal or Sri Lanka or even the Maldives and Bangladesh. And of course there was an active social life that went with that in the lounges and in the evenings. So, as I say, the time went by quickly. Being in New York, of course, is an enormous and very stimulating opportunity. That was one of the great attractions of the job, as well. So the time went by very, very quickly. But it was for a brief period. It was just for the length of the General Assembly session,

Q: What was your read on the caliber and effectiveness, from what you saw, of the Indian and the Pakistani delegations?



THIBAULT: They were, the permrep position is a very senior one in their systems. In fact, I got to know the Indian permanent representative quite well later on in Saudi Arabia where he was the ambassador and then in India, when I was later stationed there and he had retired and I saw him quite regularly. He came to my home in New Delhi, we knew each other. These are key positions for them, as it is for us. They were experienced professionals but they had a policy to pursue and that's what they did as effectively as the UN system permits an ambassador to be.

Q: Well then you left there for what, six months?

THIBAULT: Six months. I then went to the Board of Examiners as an examiner for the oral portion of the Foreign Service exam, based at the old FSI building in downtown Arlington. Again, this was a really unique experience for me. As a Foreign Service officer invariably you have preconceptions and possibly stereotypes of how the process of recruiting new officers works. There's not much transparency about it, at least there never seemed to me to be so. So impressions that may or may not have been accurate at one time or the other persist long years after things have changed. So for me it was really revealing, particularly to see how objective the examination process was, at least as I found it.

In the sense that there was no way in which you could tilt or weigh or game the system in favor of one candidate or the other because of how that process was constructed. Meaning that the candidate would pass through a number of interactions with different oral exam panel members over a full day. You worked with, if not a script, at least pretty detailed guidelines and you had a grading system keyed to very specific aspects of the candidate's performance. It reminded me of nothing so much as of international ice skating competition, where you watched the skaters on the screen and at the bottom of the screen numbers pop up. Even the rating system, at least the numbers, seemed similar to ours at BEX, because in skating it seems to be on a scale of, let's say, one to nine and it was about the same for the foreign service exam. Meaning that virtually no one got nine but most of the candidates were in the seven or eight and it was, just as in skating, you would have 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.1, 7.4, 7.5. Now for you and me, as spectators watching the competition unfold on television, it's often impossible to see how one is better than the other unless he really crashes on the ice rink. And similarly here, too. The gradations were so fine and it was cumulative over the course of the day. So you finally would wind up with a candidate's score of let's say 7.4 and the cutoff for passing would be, say, 7.3 and those above it were given the chance to move to the next stage and those beneath it were not.



And yet of the people who didn't quite make it, you'd be hard pressed to say what, specifically, was their shortcoming. You could document it; in fact you had to do so in writing at each step, because you had to justify it and to protect the system against law suits, I believe. Those records of each candidate's performance throughout the day are retained on file for a long time. The oral exam process was very revealing also of the caliber of candidates. The quality of people who made it through the written exam and then into the orals was very high. We examiners all told ourselves that we probably could not make it through the exam process! We also traveled. As BEX panel members, we operated not only in Washington but would travel to different parts of the country and be in a particular spot for a week or two, interviewing candidates and applying this same process there. Wherever we went, we encountered just great people, many with wonderful experience - job experience, academic experience, language experience, life experience. So it gave me great confidence in the ability of the service to recruit good people.

It also gave me great confidence in, I repeat, the objectivity of the system whereby notwithstanding the emphasis by the system, and rightly so, on making the Foreign Service officer corps representative of the nation's diversity, there were no special breaks given to anybody. You either passed on your own merit or you didn't. Even if you wanted to, you really couldn't skew it. So those who are there today, at least as a result of that kind of process, as I observed and worked in it, merited it. I mean they got in on their own.

So that, to me, was a very revealing and a good experience, I must say, and I would often make that point to others, as well.

Q: You didn't feel pressure about admitting more minorities?

THIBAULT: No, in terms of what I was doing, no, none whatsoever. There was no attempt, when I was there, to do that. Obviously, there's an effort. Ironically my son, who's in the advertising business, his employer has the contract for recruitment advertisement for the Department and he himself is personally involved in this. So I know that then, as well as now, there's an outreach to minorities and perhaps less so to women. At one time there was a real push to get more women. And particular kinds of minorities. Hispanics, for example, are in very short supply. Asians, you've got plenty of candidates there. African-Americans, while the push had been there in the past, it's still very active today but they particularly want to reach out to Hispanics. So the recruitment effort, the advertising, getting the information out, targeting various schools and workplaces where you have a good chance of contacting qualified minorities and bringing the Foreign Service to their attention, yes, that is there. But in terms of the examination process that I've described and that I was part of, no. There was no pressure. If you had a minority candidate, he or she was treated exactly as anyone else.



Q: You took Arabic. From when to when?

THIBAULT: I took Arabic from August of '94 to the following June or July. It was the first year of the two- year language program, meaning that I did not go to Tunis for the follow-up year in the region. I had been offered the job of political counselor in New Delhi but because of my wife's job commitment that she had made when we came back from Nepal, I didn't feel that we could leave at that time. That was why I had this year in which to be at the UN and to go into the Board of Examiners. But I had been very interested in diversifying myself somewhat so when the Saudi opening came up, I was glad to get it. By that time I had been promoted, after I left the refugee program, I'd been promoted into the Senior Foreign Service. And there were not many candidates at that level for the political counselor, which was an OC or Counselor level job. Counselors tend to seek management positions, such as DCM-ships, rather than political section head jobs. That didn't bother me as I had already had plenty of management experience.

NEA was not particularly enamored of having an outsider come in for that job, given the high profile of Riyadh in the Bureau. But when you have a candidate who's at the grade level and had my professional experience and was willing to take Arabic, there was not very much that they could object to. So I studied Arabic for a year. By that time NFTAC (National Foreign Affairs Training Center) had been opened, so the training was here in Arlington. It included a month in Jordan, in Kerak, in April 1995. You wouldn't do this today for security reasons, but Kerak is a small provincial city, about two to three hours south of Amman, and two hours east of Petra, with an old Crusader fort. We stayed, a group of us, about eight or nine of us, stayed at a little hotel. In the morning we attended lectures in Arabic at a local university and in the afternoon we had hired students and we just walked around town for several hours, practicing our spoken Arabic, as we did among ourselves in the evening. It was our stab at language immersion

Because I did not take the two year program, which to this day I regret, but there was just no way in which I could do it, I was determined to concentrate on the speaking portion of the language training. As I stated earlier, my observation, when I had studied Hindi, was that the reading portion of that training was not of much use to me in India, where everything was in English. So you never got to use it. It would have been much better to tilt your time towards speaking competency. So that's really what I emphasized in Arabic. I did all right in the reading portion of the test, but I really focused on the spoken language and, of course, immersing myself, through all of the lectures and readings that they give you on Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, Middle East, Arab culture and so forth.

Q: How old were you when you were taking this?

THIBAULT: I was, let me see, this was in '95, so I would have been 54. That's an interesting question for you to raise.



Q: I know, because the older you get ...

THIBAULT: Now, be careful of what you say, Stu, because you're playing into stereotypes. That was one I encountered repeatedly. People would say, "Oh, you're studying Arabic, such a hard language and at your age." I don't accept that at all. I grew up bilingual and I've never had any difficulty with languages. I studied a lot of Spanish, for example, in college and still speak and read it fairly well, and then Hindi and Urdu, becoming very proficient. It's a question of attitude and whether you're intimidated by the prospect and I was not intimidated by studying Arabic. So I never had any problem and it was not a big issue. So I spent a year doing that. I truly regret, deeply regret I did not spend that second year in Tunis, because what I found, just to go ahead a little bit, when I arrived in Riyadh, I had by that time a two plus in spoken Arabic. I had made an enormous effort to get that. It's not an easy language. I arrive in Riyadh and no one speaks Arabic there. The whole Saudi elite has been educated in the United States. They all speak English. There were no less than three English language dailies in Riyadh. The foreign population is so enormous, thirty to forty per cent of the population and they all speak English. That's why they're recruited to come there. So English is really the lingua franca. So to keep up with your Arabic, particularly if you've not had the two-year program, is very difficult.

Just to add to that, unlike my experience in India and in Pakistan, where I could have private tutors who could come to my home at six in the morning and which I would pay for. They would be on their way to work as teachers, for example and they would come by to my house and we would just chat in Hindi or in Urdu for a full hour and then I would have breakfast and go on to the office. I would do this on a daily basis and I hoped to do that in Riyadh as well. But unfortunately the embassy and our residences are all in an area called the Diplomatic Quarter, which is a little ghetto and there are no Saudis who live there. And security is a big issue, it was even then. So it's not possible to have a tutor and the embassy language program is not suitable. I had studied on a much higher level than would be appropriate for that class and I just didn't have the time, either, during the day. So my Arabic really suffered, as a result of that. It would not have suffered as much if I had had that two-year program.

Q: Well, you got there, you were in Saudi Arabia from when to when?

THIBAULT: I was there for five years. I was there from July, of '95, to July of 2000. For three I was political counselor and for two years I was deputy chief of mission.

Q: How stood our relations with Saudi Arabia when you arrived?



THIBAULT: They were very good. In my view, Saudi Arabia is a much maligned country but very few of its critics, very few people speak with any degree of knowledge, I mean substantive knowledge, about it. So it's a country about which there are tremendous misperceptions. But the relationship was a very close one, a very collaborative one. It was throughout that period. We had enormous interests in Saudi Arabia, particularly at that time, from military cooperation - our largest military aid missions were thereto commercial interests, the trade relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia being larger than that of all of the other Middle East countries, including Israel, put together. And the energy relationship is vital to us. The role of the Saudis in the Gulf is also absolutely key to the U.S. position in the Gulf. The cooperation on political issues, consultations and dialogue, was also vital. So all of this was in place when I arrived in 1995 and it continued, despite growing strains and problems in the relationship.

Q: Noticing, I think, in the paper today, our Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, has just come back from the Middle East or maybe she's still there, but some of the columnists are saying, "Here we are, talking about bringing democracy and stopping human rights abuses and Saudi Arabia is the worst violators of all these things." Was this in the air when you were there?

THIBAULT: Well, certainly, the way I'd put it is that Saudi Arabia is a country with which we have enormous shared interests and virtually no shared values. You can calibrate the U.S.-Saudi relationship almost to the last dime or you can measure it almost to the last dime, because the interests are very quantifiable and very specific. But we have virtually no shared values. By contrast, for example, with India, we had for many years relatively few shared interests but enormous shared values and in the long term the shared values are just as important, if not more important, than the shared interests. In terms of popular understanding, public understanding and public support for the relationship in the United States, that is the great weakness of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. We were conscious of it from the very beginning. We had to write a human rights report, for example, each year and we had a similar Congressionally mandated religious freedom report. We had constant problems on the issue of religious freedom. Cases being brought to our attention of the religious police harassing, many times arresting, mistreating, Christians who were practicing their religion. We had issues of consular access arising out of American women who had married Saudis and then getting divorced or separated from their husbands and wishing, indeed they were desperate for, access to and a relationship with their children. That was a constant problem there. We faced constant congressional inquiries on very particular complaints. So yes, human rights, civil rights, religious rights, were very much a part of our agenda.

Q: Who was your ambassador when you got there?



THIBAULT: The ambassador then was Ambassador Ray Mabus. Ambassador Mabus had been governor of Mississippi and was a personal friend of President Clinton. They both were of the same generation, same sort of southern political background. He was there for a year and then was succeeded by Ambassador Wyche Fowler, former Democratic senator from the state of Georgia. So those were the two ambassadors in the five years that I was there.

Q: Stick to the ambassadors, how did you see they worked? I mean, here are men out of the American political scene thrust into an area that very few Americans know how to deal with, including foreign service.

THIBAULT: That's right. Their value to the relationship, and as the Saudis saw them, was that they had a personal tie with the president. The Saudis definitely prefer a political ambassador to a career ambassador. We've not had many career ambassadors and when we did have one there in the late 80's , Hume Horan, he was PNGed (declared persona non grata), in effect, within a very short time of his arrival. I don't want to generalize, but the Saudis, I believe firmly, prefer, by and large, political ambassadors. I mean they've never said that but that was certainly my reading of them. The ambassador, whether it was Ambassador Mabus or certainly Ambassador Fowler, whom I got to know very well, had full access to the Saudi leadership. The American ambassador was always the envy of his ambassadorial colleagues because he could request a meeting with Crown Prince Abdullah or with King Fahd, before he had his stroke, and with other senior princes - and it is the royal family that definitely runs that country - and be received within a day or two. Access was never an issue for the American ambassador.

Q: Well one of the things, at least within Foreign Service ranks, is that, this also applies to Morocco, where the king there preferred political ambassadors because he didn't like Arabists because he felt they knew where the bodies were buried or something like that. Is that the feeling?



THIBAULT: You know, I'm skeptical of that. I think from the perspective of the Saudi leadership, they've been around a long time. They've dealt with the United States for decades now. Their ambassador here, Prince Bandar, would be the dean of the diplomatic corps, if he allowed himself to be so. He's been here since the early Eighties. They've gone through one administration after the other. They've dealt with many ambassadors. My point in mentioning this is that for them what counts, far more, is access to the very top levels of the U.S. administration, the U.S. government. That's how Middle East culture works. I mean the ambassador, when he was seeking a meeting and was under instructions, he didn't ask to see the minister of labor or the minister of finance, he would go to the, I mean sometimes he would if it was a technical issue. But if it was truly important he would go to see the crown prince or the king. To have an ambassador who was a personal friend of the president, that counted far more than having some, let's face it, bureaucrat like myself or someone else who arrives, who may be deeply versed in the culture but who ranks in our system down on the totem pole from the assistant secretary, the under secretary, and the secretary of state. That's not the way they want to work.

Q: Did you find while you were there, with Prince Bandar the Saudi ambassador in Washington, was he a power unto himself?

THIBAULT: No, Prince Bandar would, I recall, come to Saudi Arabia maybe twice a year. He did not necessarily make a beeline for our ambassador. And again, this is sort of how their system works. There's a pecking order of princes and in the royal family which now includes thousands of members. Prince Bandar has his place there but he is not one of the senior princes. He can advise, he can guide, they have confidence in him. They're very pleased that he has the access and the personal relationships he has developed in Washington but he's not the one who's making Saudi policy.

Q: Well, when you were there, what were the, let's start when you arrived. In the first place, in a country that doesn't have a political system, or at least a democratic political system, what does the political counselor do?



THIBAUT: As I said at the outset, the relationship is a very broad one. We have a lot of very specific problems or areas for discussion that arise on a daily, on a continuing basis. Many included the common issues that arise in any normal diplomatic relationship for a political counselor to deal with, such as UN votes, politics in the Gulf affecting neighboring countries, reaction to the Bosnian events, Middle East peace process questions, visiting Congressional delegations etc. which consumed a lot of effort. Then there were issues unique to the bilateral relationship, probably the most important of which at the time of my arrival and over the years was the pol-mil relationship, military to military relationship. We had two military missions. One that was working with the Saudi Arabian National Guard and the other one with the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Defense. Now the Saudi Arabian National Guard reported directly to Crown Prince, now King, Abdullah, who is their commander. The ministry of defense reports to the defense minister, Prince Sultan, Abdullah's half-brother, and now Crown Prince. Those are very separate organizations, each with its own U.S. training mission, fully paid for, fully funded by the Saudis. There were no concessionary terms for them. If we speak of the supply of F-15 aircraft to the Saudi air force and training in its use, that relationship is with the ministry of defense. With the Saudi Arabian National Guard the mil-mil relationship consisted primarily of relatively low-tech training. But each of these missions employed several hundred Americans, military, as well as civilian contractors. They were there on a continuing basis. They'd been there for the past thirty or forty years, and presumably they are still there. That's a very important part of our commercial relationship, too, I might add., although it's rarely counted as such. In other words, our U.S. defense contractors have a big stake in the successful operation of these missions. Anyone who tells you that doesn't carry weight in the overall political relationship is fooling himself.

But in addition to this, we also had Operation Southern Watch (OSW), U.S. Air Force wings deployed to Saudi Arabia to keep an eye on Iraq, on Saddam Hussein, which had been based in Saudi Arabia since the Gulf War. Their presence represented quite a significant commitment on our side and a political risk, as we have since learned, on the Saudi side, to have this large U.S. military presence in the kingdom. My point in detailing all of this is that it involved constant problems that would come up and would have to be resolved by the embassy and often by the ambassador. In other countries, you would have the military attachés who might be able to handle such issues, and many were handled that way, not to mention by the training missions themselves. I don't want to suggest otherwise. But in Riyadh the embassy was the big focal point for nurturing the whole broad spectrum of the bilateral relationship, including its formidable military component, unlike other countries where the military operated independently of the Ambassador. In Riyadh, the heads of the training missions, general officers, were very much members of the country team.



For example, whether it was funding for fuel for OSW - who's going to pay for that, if there is a surge that carries costs beyond what was budgeted? Who's going to pay for the upgrade of the radar capabilities or for added costs with Patriot missiles based in the country, or to station new missiles after some provocative action by Saddam? Who's going to pay for new housing to accommodate any additional personnel who might be sent there? Or how do we find, build, and pay for the new housing required after Khobar when the US personnel at the Saudi air station at Dhahran were moved from in-town apartment housing to more easily secured and isolated compounds in Riyadh? These were big issues for both sides, especially for the Saudis whose oil was selling for \$10 a barrel in the late 90's and thus faced a major budget crunch. High-powered U.S. delegations came out precisely to discuss such issues. Funding issues were a major and constant element of our bilateral dialogue, including prodding for payments on existing contracts and earlier obligations. There is that image of the Saudis swimming in oil wealth, which may be true today when oil sells at \$60 a barrel, but certainly wasn't then.

There might be accidents, U.S. personnel killed on the highway between Prince Sultan Airbase where the OSW aircraft were stationed and Riyadh; how do you handle the disposition of remains? Given the nature of their system, all of this funnels up to the top. So the embassy was very engaged on these issues. We had a political-military counselor as well myself as a political counselor, but we worked together very closely on this in supporting the Ambassador and in working with the senior U.S. military officers stationed in the kingdom who would seek our engagement and support in resolving these questions and I must say, nine times out of ten, we worked out acceptable arrangements with the Saudis. And the USG not only sought money for purely U.S. Saudi purposes but for broader foreign policy causes as well.

When I arrived we had the Bosnia War going on. We were very keen to have Saudi financial assistance to support humanitarian operations in the Balkans. Or it might be for Palestinian aid, African disaster relief, whatever the Administration would try to tap Saudi coffers because it had no money of its own readily at hand or not enough. We called it 'tin-cupping the Kingdom.' We had special envoys come out to meet with them on some of these worthy causes. I must say that normally, the Saudis kept their hands on their wallets in such cases. Throughout my five years, we had a constant flow of high level visitors, CODELs. The Secretary of Defense, SecDef, would be out there twice a year. You'd have the CINCs, the CENTCOM commander, there. You would have the individual air force and army generals from the Pentagon, and then very regularly, the senior-most air force and army generals in CENTCOM. You would have representatives of the joint Chief of Staff travel to Riyadh or Jeddah where the king lived and where the Crown Prince resided for several months each year. There was a constant flow of senior Americans, up to the Vice President, who wanted to interact with the Saudis and the political section handled much of this in support of the Ambassador.



In addition, we had our domestic reporting which became increasingly important as Islamist pressure manifested itself. That was a key priority for us. Keep in mind that the Saudis did not allow any journalists, American or other journalists, into the kingdom, nor any tourists. There is virtually no academic expertise in the United States on Saudi Arabia, at least on their politics. There are no exchanges of scholars. There are no independent travelers. No foreigner can enter Saudi Arabia without sponsorship, without Saudi sponsorship. In other words, the whole network of contacts that existed, for example, between the United States and the Soviet Union, even in the darkest days of the Cold War, was not replicated in Saudi Arabia. Which meant that the burden fell on the embassy and on the political section in particular to try to explain what was happening, to analyze what were the currents, as we could discern them, in Saudi Arabia. And then, of course, you have your routine reporting which can be very time consuming. I say routine, not that it's not important, but on human rights report, which would take a lot of an officer's time for several months, and you would have the religious freedom report. And, again, because these were very widely read public documents, you had to make a special effort to keep abreast of what was happening in these areas, or not happening. And there were others as well. So we were very busy, I can assure you.

Q: Well, what about, there are all sorts of people and I think there are several women particularly who have written extensively on Saudi Arabia. They've made trips and all. Were these people around or were they picking up information from somewhere else somewhere?

THIBAULT: You mean Americans? We did not see very many of them. As I've said, you could not enter the country without sponsorship. So you had to have a defined purpose. And it's not easy, once you get into the country then to sort of wander around. There are a lot of barriers. And you mention women. Sandra Mackey comes to mind but she was married to someone living there, working with one of the private companies.

Q: Just one of the issues, what about women at the American air force base?

THIBAULT: To be honest with you, the times that I visited, I went quite often down to Prince Sultan Air Force Base, I do not recall seeing any American female military personnel. Nor at the residential compound on the outskirts of Riyadh although there were many spouses. The military missions certainly didn't have any women attached to them. I know in the Gulf War there were reports of problems that female military personnel faced. But during the time I was there that was not really a big issue.



Q: One of the issues which comes to the forefront since 9/1, according to some reports, the Saudis have sort of made a pact with, I'm talking about the royal family, made a pact with the devil, if you want to call it, and that is with the religious leaders. You can do whatever you want, just stay away from us. And that you had these schools, not just in Saudi Arabia, in Pakistan and eastern Africa and other places, where imams or mullahs, preaching hatred of foreigners, the Americans. Was this something you were monitoring?

THIBAULT: This really raises the whole issue of terrorism and the role of anti-terrorism, in our relationship. I arrived in July of '95. King Fahd experienced or suffered a stroke in November of '95 which incapacitated him and led to Crown Prince Abdullah, taking charge of the government and that remains the case to this day. Fahd, I might add, from a medical perspective, made a remarkable recovery, having survived all these years but he's not capable of managing the country. So he continues to have an honorary role. I mention this because the change in leadership really prompted us, within the embassy and within my section in particular, to take a very close look at Saudi leadership issues and patterns of succession. Who were the new contenders? What were the implications of Abdullah taking over from Fahd? What was his relationship with Prince Sultan, who was the minister of defense and regarded as the likely successor to Abdullah? More broadly, we examined the relationship of these individual princes and of the royal family to the society at large. This effort, which was a major priority for us, was accelerated by the fact that at that same time, in November '95, a terrorist bomb explosion occurred in downtown Riyadh, at the office of the U.S. mission supporting the Saudi Arabian National Guard, in which five Americans were killed and others were wounded. This was the first terrorist attack on the Americans in Saudi Arabia, at least that I'm aware of. Now no one claimed responsibility but questions were raised as to why it had occurred, what was its background. Within a relatively short period of time, the Saudis arrested the perpetrators, the alleged perpetrators, of this attack, who then made a confession on television that they were Islamicly motivated. As I recall, this was in February or March of '96. So one immediate consequence was to reexamine our security posture and I'll come to that, dwell on this at greater length later on. But the other one was to really take a closer look at the Saudi internal scene.

In June of 1996 there was a second terrorist attack, at Khobar, on the eastern coast, just outside of Dhahran, in which a truck bomb exploded outside an apartment building which housed a number of U.S. military personnel who were attached to the office helping the Saudis at the local Saudi air base.

Q: Was this Khobar Towers?



THIBAULT: Yes, Khobar Towers. Nineteen Americans were killed. I might add, if I recall correctly, 18 were killed by glass, flying glass. It could have been avoided. So 19 servicemen were killed, plus five a few months earlier, for a total of 24 Americans and many more injured. That prompted a tremendous review in Washington as well as in the field, in Riyadh itself, of what was going on, what was happening, how do we respond to this, what is driving that. The suspicion and very strong belief that developed very quickly was that, in one way or the other, the Iranians were behind the Khobar attack, if not the first one. None of this is particularly secret today but at the time it was closely held. Individual names of Iranian operatives surfaced and of course the concern was that the Iranians were perhaps working through the local Shiite community to target Americans.

Q: Which is fairly strong in the Eastern Province.

THIBAULT: There's a very strong Shiite presence in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, particularly around the oil fields there, Aramco and the like. The FBI finally managed to open an office in Riyadh and we began developing it, but it took quite a bit of doing and I must say the ambassador deserves a lot of the credit for being able to push it through, this was Ambassador Fowler, for being able to bring the Saudis around to cooperation on the investigation. But obviously it was in their interest as well. They saw what a powerful reaction there was in the United States. The whole foundation of the relationship was being questioned. With subsequent attacks in Yemen on the USS Cole and on our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, with which bin Laden and Al-Qaeda became identified, the focus shifted to the Sunni versus Shiite dimension of terrorism. In addition to trying to get the Saudis to apply pressure on the Taliban in Afghanistan to take action against bin Laden in Afghanistan, we continued to look more closely at the relationship between the Sunni religious establishment in the kingdom and the royal family.



So to come to your question, you start with the foundations of Saudi Arabia, a religious and political pact between the Wahhabi strand of Islamic teaching and philosophy and the al Saud, which has existed for almost two hundred years. This was not something new. I think you expressed it pretty accurately in saying that, "We'll do our thing and you do yours." And it wasn't merely an opportunistic alliance. Nor was it a conspiracy. I think that there is a deep conviction that it is the Al-Saud responsibility as guardians of the holy shrines. The king's title formal title in Saudi Arabia is "Guardian and Protector of the Two Holy Shrines", Medina and Mecca. They had a responsibility, as they saw it for many years, to support Islam, to propagate it. Supporting and propagating not only at home by creating a social and educational system that reflected a strict version of Islam; not only in terms of their enormous investment in infrastructure at Mecca, in particular, to allow millions of Muslims from around the world to conduct the hajj pilgrimage in a comfortable and efficient manner; but also to support organizations that tried to propagate Islam around the world. That's where you have the funding relationships developing with about half a dozen of these organizations. And it was not just a question of the royal family. It was an obligation on business people, on the Saudi public. There's a deep belief that this is an appropriate role for Saudis to play. They see themselves as special in the Arab world and in the Muslim world because Arabia is their holy land. That's the rationale for not permitting foreign places of public worship for other religions. You point out, well in Kuwait and in Jordan and many other Muslim countries, Christians and Jews and Hindus and whatever, Buddhists, can all worship freely. "Well, yes, that's fine there but we're the holy land, we can't permit it here." And they'll quote a statement by the Prophet Mohammed to that effect. So there was this. There was this part of their outlook and therefore of their policy which had been in place for many years. And as they grew wealthy, they were able to funnel funds to these organizations, over which, once they left Saudi Arabia, they had no control, or very little.

Q: Well, were you able, when you were political counselor, to say, "I'd like to see copies of the syllabus or the textbooks of what's being taught in, say the Saudi religious schools or universities or in the grammar school level." Were we looking at that?



THIBAULT: No, at that time, we did not. We did not go into that level of detail in our reporting, as I recall. I mean, we knew in a general sense, not so much at the primary and secondary level but at the university level, that it was a very narrow view of Islam and, in fact, the whole curriculum was tightly controlled by the religious leadership. That was their province, implementing the compact between the Wahabi establishment and the Al-Saud. That was no secret but the concern expressed for a long time was couched as an economic development issue. Here was a country having incredible oil resources that had achieved staggering progress in building infrastructure and the wherewithal of a modern country, and yet their educational system was overwhelmingly tilted towards teaching subjects that had little or no practical value. The Saudi leadership was well aware of the disconnect of having a high population growth rate, producing large numbers of young men who couldn't find jobs, and yet at the same time also having in their country an enormous population of foreigners doing the work. The problem was not that the economy didn't generate jobs but that they weren't being filled by Saudis. So the issue of religious predominance and control of education was viewed in these terms, rather than in terms of the basic philosophy that was being taught at lower levels, which is the issue that arose after 9/11, when scrutiny of Saudi textbooks revealed a consistent theme of active hostility and even aggression against non-Muslims being drummed into young students.

Q: One of the things you mentioned was infrastructure. Saudi Arabia has, you might say, a terrible reputation and everything, but when you take a look at what it has done with its oil wealth - yes, the princes have done well and all that but there was a tremendous infrastructure that was built. You take a country like Nigeria, where the oil goes out and is practically pumped to Geneva or Zurich, where it goes into the bank accounts and nothing is happening. And in so many other countries. A significant part of Saudi riches have gone to help the people, I use this qualified term, because it really hasn't done much for the youth, in preparing them to become responsible citizens.

THIBAULT: I think I would agree with you. I recall seeing home films of Americans who had been there for many, many years, made back in the Sixties of Riyadh and what it was like when I was there, 35 years later. The change was incredible.

Q: I was in Dhahran in the Fifties. It was a sleepy little town. Also, the Trucial States, as they were called in those days. Dhows beached. Great things have been done and a significant portion of the investment has gone to the people, which has not been the case in a lot of other countries.



THIBAULT: I agree with you. Partly I think it's again the Bedouin and tribal mentality, if you will, where the royal family does not exist in isolation. The Al-Saud are woven into the very fabric of Saudi society. King Abdul Aziz, the founder of Saudi Arabia, is famous for his matrimonial policy. I don't know how many marriages he contracted but he made a very specific point of marriages with tribal leaderships across Arabia so that he would build a network of family ties. So to with his sons and daughters, of whom there are many and then their grandchildren and the like. It's very hard to separate them from Saudi Arabia. It's striking when you look at the Moroccan and Jordanian and some other royal families. They're a handful of people. And then you look at the Saudi royal family. Which is why I think that system, that political system, has much more stamina than people give it credit for.

Q: In the late Fifties, when I was in Dhahran, one of the questions was, how long will the Saudi rule last? The answer was, probably not very long. We were looking at almost everything those days being run by the Palestinians. Which was a dangerous mix. Now they are run by Bangladeshis, who are no threat.

THIBAULT: Yeah, that's exactly it. And they're very shrewd. In 1990, at the time of the Gulf War, when Arafat endorsed Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait, that was interpreted by the Saudi leadership as in effect inviting Saddam to occupy Saudi Arabia, particularly given the rhetoric that Saddam was employing at the time. They immediately expelled the Palestinians. They expelled the Yemenis whose president voiced similar views. The only significant foreign Arab presence now in Saudi Arabia are the Egyptians but they're greatly outnumbered by people from Asia, who, Muslim or not, cannot obtain citizenship, they don't speak the language, they have nothing in common, they have no desire to remain permanently. They're guest workers in the real sense of the word and they represent no political threat to the Saudis. So they've been able to maintain political stability for a long time and I see no sign that this is in any way in jeopardy at present. Now I've been away for several years. I may be misreading them but I think they have a lot of political assets.

Q: Well tell me, let's go back to Khobar Towers. I was interviewing, I believe it was Wayne White, who was an INR analyst who dealt with this, among other things and he was saying that it became quite clear early on that the Iranians probably were behind this but that the Saudis didn't want this to come out. And at the same time things were happening in Iran where we were feeling things were changing in Iran, getting more liberal. So the whole thing was an attitude, held both by the United States and by the Saudis, sort of we didn't follow it to the close. Was this your feeling?



THIBAULT: Certainly I think on the part of the Saudis, they were very reluctant to publicly identify the Iranians. I think that the most compelling reason is that they were uncertain what the American reaction would be if evidence became overwhelming and incontrovertible that the Iranians were in fact behind this. And as I say, though the view favoring Iranian responsibility emerged very soon in Washington, I'm not sure there was conclusive, absolutely dead-sure kind of evidence, within a reasonable period of time, that the Iranians were involved. To the extent that the Saudis feared that such evidence might be uncovered, then our reaction would become unpredictable for them. They had their own problems with the Iranians and they were not inclined to roil those waters. So I think that this hesitation or this ambivalence, maybe that's the better word, ambivalence, created a feeling among many Americans, particularly on the investigative side, that they were not getting full access to the information that the Saudis had.

Q: Also from Wayne, Wayne White, he felt that some punches were being pulled at the NSC, at the top, I guess Sandy Berger, level, because of what was perceived as being a change in Iran. Hope, which I guess, springs eternal.

THIBAULT: I recall Rafsanjani, who's now, ironically, again candidate for president, had just taken office and he was viewed as maybe a bit little more liberal. I know the Saudis had great fears of the Iranians, particularly, for example, in their ability to disrupt the hajj.

Q: They did it once.

THIBAULT: They did it once, that's right, in 1987, I believe. It took on an anti-American tinge, thousands of Iranian pilgrims hoisting Khomeini placards and shouting slogans in the most sacred precincts of the Grand Mosque, which deeply shocked the Saudis. In fact, there was a clash in Mecca then in which several hundred people were killed. This event, this politicization of the Hajj, was especially troubling because it jeopardized the Saudi reputation for managing a peaceful hajj for all Muslims. Guardianship of the Holy Places is their unshakable claim to legitimacy at home and in the Muslim world. This is an area of real vulnerability for them and they know that the Iranians know they can push that button. So regarding Khobar, they perhaps handled them in very gingerly fashion, as they did regarding the Iranian occupation of disputed islands on the coast of Bahrain and the UAE. The Saudis were quite restrained in commenting publicly on this and in responding to the pressure for a stronger stance that came from some of their Gulf neighbors. So I think that was part of it, yes.

Q: You referred, you were going to talk more about sort of security.



THIBAULT: Well, these explosions, and particularly the one at Khobar June 1996, were the turning point, not just for our security posture in Saudi Arabia, but even worldwide for U.S. embassies because it was clear that we had an ideological adversary targeting Americans in our most vulnerable locations. To that extent, perhaps, it differed from the attack on the Marines in the early Eighties in Beirut, where you might argue it happened in response to the immediate situation at the time. In any event, we immediately redeployed our military missions and presence in Saudi Arabia. We reduced our footprint, as they say. For example, the U.S. military presence at the base in Dhahran was terminated. We consolidated our assets at the Prince Sultan Airbase which is in central Saudi Arabia, south of Riyadh, about 60-70 miles south of Riyadh, where we had not had much infrastructure, in part because it was in the middle of nowhere, therefore more difficult to attack, easier to defend, to isolate. We placed tremendous new constraints on the movement of our military personnel in public, for example, in Riyadh. In the embassy we took a whole series of measures, which included closing off several streets around the embassy, of course working with the Saudi government on this. And again the ambassador had to go to the top to get approval for this. The interior minister, Prince Nayif, was very reluctant to permit it, regarding it as a challenge to the Saudi obligation to guarantee security. So we closed off several streets, we developed physical barriers, we expanded the open space around the embassy.

Q: For a bomb blast area, the farther away it occurs, the less likely a car bomb can kill and damage.

THIBAULT: That's right. Over time, as quickly as funding and construction permitted the building itself was strengthened, and access to it was greatly tightened. We redeployed housing for many of our people. Not so difficult in Riyadh because we were already in the Diplomatic Quarter, as I mentioned. In Dhahran and in Jeddah, there was considerable strengthening of the perimeter defenses around the compound of the two consulates there, including units of the Saudi Arabian National Guard on permanent guard there as well. Our U.S. contractor community took many similar steps. Security around the American school took the same pattern as around the Embassy. Security became the watchword for all of us and that continued throughout the remainder of the period that I was there.

Q: Were you seeing any movements within Saudi society, I'm thinking of women's ability to drive cars and other things. Were there any other groups than women trying to get somewhere?



THINBAULT: Just before I had arrived, and this was almost a precursor of bin Laden and the fundamentalist reaction against the United States and the Saudi leadership, you had had several preachers in the town of Qassim arrested. They had been circulating manifestos directed against the Saudi leadership and cassette tapes of some of their sermons had also circulated. So that really put an end, at least for several years, of any consideration of change in the political system.

Q: These cassettes, they were attacking the government for being too liberal?

THIBAUT: Well, yes, for compromising on Islamic principles. You had Saudi exiles in London who were flooding the country with faxes denouncing the royal family. Ironically, the net result of this was to frighten many people into believing that the fundamentalists had more clout and more influence than had been appreciated. The view emerged, particularly among the more educated Saudis and particularly the ones whom we saw, that the Saudi princes were more liberal than their society as a whole. You did not see any movement towards women driving or any liberalization of restrictions on religious worship. You had a response by the leadership of holding back on whatever might be their personal or natural impulses to bring their society up to contemporary standards because they felt vulnerable.

Q: I suppose part of the thing was their saying, "Okay, fine, we have a democracy, it'll be one vote and that'll be the end of it. It'll turn into a fundamentalist society."



THIBAULT: At least my experience there was that there were very few advocating fully representative democracy. They have an advisory council called the Shura, all appointed members. The steps that were being advocated at that time were to make their proceedings more transparent, to draw from a wider spectrum of society, to allow a broader agenda than had normally been discussed, to allow media reporting on their meetings and discussions, these sorts of things. Not that this should become an elective body. For two reasons, I think. In part because, as you say, there was a concern about who might become elected as a result of that. I think that what you have to give greater weight to was the strongly held belief that an Islamic political system should not necessarily reflect or, in their words, "ape" Western norms. Saudi Arabia, I emphasize, is a deeply, deeply conservative and very religious society. It's easy to list all of its shortcomings by our standards but I think in many ways the Saudi leadership has its finger to the political wind and they're extremely sensitive to what they think public opinion will accept. They would not have survived as long as they have without that ability to discern public opinion. Moreover, the family is so large and then the tribal connections are such that their tentacles and their antennae extend to all corners. I have often seen Crown Prince Abdullah and other senior princes in their courts receiving hundreds of petitioners. They are open to any and all, held weekly and often more frequently, and people turn out in large numbers. There's a constant flow of people who come to see them. These men are not necessarily isolated from public opinion.

Q: The majlis.

THIBAULT: The majlis, exactly.

Q: I watched this, where the cousin of the King, was the emir of Eastern Province, this is back to the old court. But people were coming in on all sorts of things.

THIBAULT: Exactly, and this continues to this day.

Q: Equivalent to an American town meeting.



THIBAULT: So, it's not that they are isolated. This is not a Shah of Iran kind of situation. They're much closer to their people than we give them credit for. You saw it reflected in Secretary Rice's visit, you mentioned it, a couple of days ago in Riyadh. She met with Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, graduate of Princeton, absolutely urbane, extremely knowledgeable and experienced man, 35 years now as foreign minister, father was the late king, King Faisal. He's heard it all before. His response is, "We'll do it at our own pace and in accordance with our own traditions and laws." I think this is how they view it. We have no leverage over them. I think this is something that few Americans appreciate. If anything, it's the other way around. Constructing a policy that will promote change in Saudi Arabia is little more than exhortation and appealing to their own sense of what's in their best interest. They have to be persuaded that it is in their own interest.

Q: Did you have a chance to sit around with the younger princes and have the equivalent of bull sessions, talking about wouldn't it be nice to do this or that? You'd find most subscribe to the "we've got it pretty good, it works well for us" line.

THIBAULT: Well, you know, it's a good question to raise because having contact with ordinary Saudis, not to mention princes, is a lot more challenging than you might think offhand. Even assuming that there isn't a language issue, there's a basic difference of hours of the day. You've lived in Saudi Arabia, you know. They entertain each other until four, five in the morning and they'll sit around a tent or someone's tent and talk all night. You can do that two, three, four times, maybe, but you can't be there every night. You're looking at your watch and you know you have to be at the office at eight o'clock and earlier. You can say that jokingly but it is a big issue, it's a big issue. The other interesting aspect of this is that it's harder to meet Saudis than you might think, if only because so much of the actual work is done by foreigners. When I've been in other countries you encounter the local nationals at different levels of society because you can come in direct contact with them just by stepping out of your embassy or stepping out of your house and just by socializing.



In Saudi Arabia, for example, we have a very large U.S. business community. When I was there we had 40,000 to 45,000 Americans resident in the kingdom, about evenly divided between Dhahran, Riyadh and Jeddah. I'd say 10,000 to 12,000 to 15,000, including dependents, in each of these three cities. You had many American companies who had business interests in Saudi Arabia. Just like the military would send its top officers out there on a constant basis, so would major firms, corporations, send senior representatives to Saudi Arabia. In any other country, they would host functions to which they would have their own local employees organize guest lists and extend invitations, at local hotels or whatever. In Saudi Arabia, the ambassador's residence became the venue for that kind of entertaining. Quincy House was in constant, unceasing use as a venue for business representational events because it was the only way in which the Saudis would respond, having to get permission, in many cases, especially if they were government officials, coming if the invitation was issued in the name of the ambassador. The ambassador might or might not be present or he might be present only for a few minutes but otherwise, if they were to host them at hotels, no one would come. Other foreigners would come. Of course, one of the attractions, I'll be candid, is that the ambassador could serve alcoholic beverages.

Q: When I was there, it was forbidden. We would serve it but only if all the guests were foreigners, were non-Saudis.

THIBAULT: Well, I'm not sure how much more liberal things have become but one of the drawing cards for Saudis to accept that kind of invitation was that they could get a drink there without the religious police looking over their shoulder. Now the corporation, the business host, would pay all expenses connected with and the ambassador could include whomever he liked. In fact the companies encouraged you to bring other guests, and in fact many of our embassy officers would come because that was their way of meeting these people as well. It was not easy to achieve otherwise. You'd go to diplomatic receptions, national day and the like and the only Saudis who would be there would be a handful of business people and a few designated representatives from the foreign ministry. No one else would come. Not that they weren't invited. No one else would come. And they almost never invited you to their homes.

Q: Was it that they needed permission or they didn't feel comfortable or what?

THIBAULT: Well, it may have been a combination. For government officials, they needed permission from the foreign ministry. If you had a Treasury official and he was working during the day with, for example, his counterparts, the latter might come. As we had several missions come to talk about WTO matters or other economic issues, these receptions were a good way for our economic officers to meet Saudis at the policy-making or operational level.



Q: World Trade Organization.

THIBAULT: World Trade Organization. Or we would have American officials come to advance our anti-terrorism cooperation, for example from the office in Treasury that tracks the movement of foreign funds. Well, you could invite Saudis in the evening and they might come but they would have been cleared to hold the meetings in the first place by the foreign ministry and therefore would have implicit permission or maybe explicit permission to attend a related social event. But our public affairs section seeking to reach out to students or professors or journalists or others like that, opinion leaders, encountered enormous difficulty, enormous difficulty. To illustrate: where I've worked in other countries, you would have a very large local country work force working in the mission, typically outnumbering the Americans by a wide margin. When I was in India, if you were not American, you were Indian. Every section had its professionals; the AID mission was very heavily dependent on Indians, right down to the gardeners. Saudi Arabia was a very big mission, a Class IV mission. I was DCM, so I knew the situation very well. Do you know how many Saudis we had working at the embassy? One. And he was the son of a Frenchman. Now, he was very helpful to us. He was in the political section and he knew an enormous number of people. His father had been physician to King Abdul Aziz, had married a Lebanese lady, become a Muslim and all of that. But he wasn't a "real" Saudi. But we had one. The hundreds of others were all from other countries. So it's easier said than done, much easier said than done.

Q: Had there been any terrorist attacks that began to zero in. You mentioned Khobar Towers but that was maybe off to one side. But what else had happened while you were there that gave focus on terrorism and maybe look a little harder at Saudi Arabia?

THIBAULT: Well, of course it was the attacks in East Africa, on the embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi and if I recall there was one other.

Q: What about the underground garage underground garage attack on the Twin Towers?



THIBAUT: That was in '93, that was before my time in Riyadh. That was an Egyptian, rather than a Saudi, the Blind Sheik. After the East African attacks bin Laden became the overwhelming priority for us. As I said earlier, we had been highly sensitized by the attack on Khobar Towers. We had had the first attack, where five people were killed, which had not been connected to the Iranians but seemed to be indigenously Saudi. We had had statements, if I recall the timeline correctly, by bin Laden even before the attacks in which he heavily criticized the Saudi royal family. There was a climate of tremendous apprehension about terrorism. The focal point for us was, in addition to further strengthening, further tightening our own defensive measures, the focal point was to bring the Saudis to put pressure on the Taliban government in Afghanistan to clamp down on bin Laden. That was the subject of numerous discussions at all levels, including the vice president, who visited and by others as well, other senior administration officials. Including Secretary Albright who came a number of times during my time, four or five times to Saudi Arabia. As I mentioned, the Secretary of Defense, Secretary Cohen in particular, was a regular visitor, the JCS, and all of them, they were all singing from the same sheet of music, so to speak. The Saudis were, I would say again, slow to come around on that. They had good ties with the Afghan resistance. They had been, along with us, a major supporter during the 1980's. They were not anxious to roil Islamic waters, if you will. They professed not to have any real connections with the Taliban, that their influence was very limited. But on the other hand, after a lot of jawboning Prince Turki, the director of intelligence, GID and the brother of the foreign minister, now ambassador in Britain, did travel at least once if not twice to Kabul, where he apparently had no success at all. But this was a continuing issue for us, tightening up on the flow of foreign funds. That had started even earlier during the Bosnian War when we had received reports that some Islamic extremists were at work in Bosnia and that there was Saudi money going to those organizations. It was a very high priority for us, a very high priority for us.

Q: Was there a media you could pay any attention to there? In other words, was there, I won't say a lively press or TV or not?



THIBAULT: No, it was very much under control. We did have reporting on sermons. We had a Muslim officer who, in Jeddah in particular, attended Friday prayer services. He would report on the content, the themes, of these sermons. Even there, just as the press and the electronic media were under very tight government control, so, too, were the mosques. The ministry of religious affairs controlled mosques and the appointment of imams to the mosques. You did not have the phenomenon you have in other Arab countries like Egypt to some extent, or even Jordan, where you have the mosque as an alternative source of assistance and aid to people in trouble and allowed to operate that way. That's not the case in Saudi Arabia. They had their own informants in the congregations who would make sure that the preacher was sticking to the subject and, if I'm not mistaken, the themes they were supposed to talk about in the Friday sermon were disseminated by the ministry of religious affairs. So they were very concerned about this. They had seen, as I mentioned to you before, these clerics from Qassim who had tried to organize a movement critical of the royal family on religious grounds.

We also had a concern with the Saudi Afghans, if I can use that term. That is, Saudis who had fought in the Afghan War with the mujahideen in the 1980's and who had come back and were imbued with a very zealous view of Islam and receptive to the notion that the royal family was violating its trust by allowing these "Crusader forces," the Americans, into the kingdom. This was the real issue for them. This offended large numbers of very conservative Muslims. We recognized that, particularly after these attacks and we tried to maintain our military presence at as low a profile as possible. And recognizing that we could not sustain this indefinitely, we began building up an alternative facility to Prince Sultan Air Base, an alternative facility in Qatar. It's interesting to note that after 9/11, in spite of the large amount of money that was invested by the Saudis who paid ninety per cent of the cost of Prince Sultan Air Base with tremendous data processing capabilities and all of that in the service of Operation Southern Watch over Iraq, that we were prepared to walk away from it and transfer this function to Qatar. And the Saudis, I am confident, were happy to see us go. So that today and now for the last several years, I think we're back down to our original military missions, the training missions which have been there for almost half a century. Which, by the way, were never a point of criticism. That was not an issue within Saudi Arabia, because there they could see this was being done to build up their own capabilities. Operation Southern Watch offended these fundamentalists, because it was seen as a means of putting pressure on another Muslim country and the royal family was complicit in that.

Q: So we basically ran our war in Iraq out of Qatar, weren't we?

THIBAULT: Yeah, out of Qatar, the war in 2003. But prior to that, Operation Southern Watch, was operated essentially out of Saudi Arabia, at least the air force part of it.

Q: Is there anything else we should talk about on this?



THIBAULT: On Saudi Arabia? There's lots I could talk about.

Q: Then in 2000

THIBAULT: In 2000, in '98, when my assignment as political counselor ended, Ambassador Fowler was very keen to have continuity, to follow up on Ted Kattouf, who later became ambassador to UAE and Syria, who had been DCM the first year or two of the ambassador's presence in Saudi Arabia. Ted and others suggested that since I had already been DCM elsewhere, that I would be a good candidate to succeed him. So I stayed on for an additional two years, from 1998 to 2000, making a total of five years in Saudi Arabia. In 2000, at the end of two years, the opening in India developed, which I had bid on earlier. With the ambassador's support, knowing how interested I was, he said, "I don't want to hold you back. You've been in-country five years now. So why don't you pursue this if you can get it." Otherwise I would have stayed for a third year as DCM.

There is one other issue. I raise it only because it's been a very large element in the 9/11 Commission's assessment of what happened, assessing the fact that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis, all of whom had received a visa. That's on the consular operation.

Q: While you were there, what was the attitude towards visas and getting young Saudis to the United States in particular?



THIBAUT: The attitude towards visas in Saudi Arabia was reflective of what I would call the general philosophy of overall consular operations as I have encountered them in my assignments. Which is that until 9/11, by and large and I won't say that this applies to every country but by and large, the view was that visa applicants should be screened and an assessment made about their eligibility based on their intentions, so far as these could be discerned, aided by a review of the applicant's family, financial, academic, etc. standing. If the general pattern in a particular country indicated a very low probability that the visa applicant would remain in the United States, then the approach was more liberal than in a country where there was a good probability of visa applicants remaining in the United States and therefore perhaps making fraudulent statements in order to qualify for the visa. Of course, the consular officer's number one question up until this period, up until 9/11, was, is this person an intending immigrant. As I've mentioned before, in Pakistan and in India, where the criteria, particularly in the early Eighties and mid-Eighties, when I was in those countries, were rather stringent, you had a relatively high visa denial rate. Beyond the general question of intention, there was particular focus on age groups and young, single men, in particular, were deemed in those countries, India and Pakistan in the early Eighties, mid-Eighties, to be high probability intending immigrants. So therefore the rate of visa issuance was much lower than would have been the case in Germany or Sweden or Japan or many other countries.

Now these factors changed, particularly as the economic prospects improved and particularly as we became more sophisticated in distinguishing between those who had a legitimate reason to go to the United States, especially for studies, from those who were there as "tourists." In Nepal, as I've mentioned earlier, before, although economic prospects were not so great in Nepal for young Nepalese, INS data suggested that very few Nepalese remained in the United States when they traveled there. So therefore the visa issuance rate, for young men for example, was much higher in Nepal than it would have been in India, simply because we were confident that when they told us why they were going there, the reason they cited was appropriate and legitimate, and that they would return.

Now, viewed in that context, Saudi Arabia was seen as a country in which very few Saudis traveling to the United States remained in the U.S. after their travel. INS data suggested that it was minuscule, in the less than one per cent category. So, not surprisingly, there was a much more open attitude towards issuing visas to Saudi applicants. That said, they had to apply for visas. There were no waivers of the appearance and personal interview requirement simply because they were Saudi citizens. The Visa Express program that attracted a great deal of critical attention from the 9/11 Commission was not put in place while I was there. So every day there would be a long lineup of Saudis outside the consular sections at the consulates in Jeddah and Dhahran as well as in Riyadh, of people applying for visas.



The other dimension to our visa issuing policy and practice which was perhaps unique to Saudi Arabia but very important in influencing the attitude of consular officers in this pre-9/11 period was the fact that a very substantial percentage of the Saudi population were non-Saudis. I've mentioned thirty to forty per cent and in the work force much higher than that. So you had millions, literally, of non-Saudi citizens living in Saudi Arabia with absolutely no prospect of ever getting Saudi citizenship or remaining permanently in Saudi Arabia, many of them highly educated, very well qualified in many different fields, proficient in English because that's how they qualified to get into Saudi Arabia in the first place. And therefore there was a reasonable presumption, it seemed to us, that many of these people who would apply would be perhaps intending immigrants. So there was particular scrutiny given to these people. They were a very large percentage, I might add, of visa applicants.

So the result of this is that for many years the pattern had been that Saudi citizens were issued visas on a fairly liberal basis whereas non-Saudis faced a rather steep barrier. Many of the latter, if they were older and they had established ties, particularly if they had been to the United States and returned, then of course that was a different matter. But for young people and particularly young men, they really had, there was a high presumption that they were intending immigrants. So this is how the section operated, by and large, during the years that I was there and, as DCM, I interacted regularly and closely with the Consul General who headed consular operations.

Q: Is anybody looking at, was the subject of potential terrorists raised at all?

THIBUALT: Well, of course we had our Visa Viper list and there were names on the lookout and each name had to be entered into the lookout system, which was tied in to a worldwide database, global database, before a visa could be issued to that person. I don't want to suggest that we bypassed those procedures. That was not at all the case. If for some reason someone's name popped up on that list, then obviously they would not be issued a visa. But it was in that context, not necessarily that Saudi citizens per se, as opposed to Egyptians or Tanzanians or whatever other nationality, might represent a higher level of terrorist threat than those nationalities.

Q: I just had a flashback as you were talking. Much was made of the fact that what were these young men doing going to flying school in the United States. I was issuing visas in Dhahran in the late 1950's and I was surprised at the number of Jordanians who were working in the Eastern Province were applying to flying schools, mostly as I recall in Texas or Oklahoma. Flying schools seemed to have quite an attraction to the young people there. It struck me at the time, I thought, "Gee, I didn't know there were that many airplanes." There was already a long pattern of doing this. We're talking about almost fifty years before.



THIBAULT: Well, ironically, in the time that I was there one of the issues that we discussed often and in fact bemoaned was the sharp drop in the number of Saudi students going to the United States. The contrast between the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties, when Saudis were number three or number four as a nationality among foreign students in the U.S., in which you would have at any given time then 20,000 to 25,000 Saudis studying in the United States with the period in which I was there in the kingdom of maybe 3,000 to 4,000 Saudi students. This was something that we regretted because we felt that the new generation of Saudis and their leaders in the future would less reflect American influence than more senior Saudis. We could see this in the ironic fact that your older generation, middle-aged generation, was a lot more liberal and modern and global in its outlook than the younger people. You would not expect that. This reflected the fact that most Saudis, and they do have universal literacy and free education and so forth, most Saudi university students attended Saudi universities. It was a very different environment than what their fathers or uncles had experienced. Then you had very specialized kinds of education like flying or others which would not necessarily involve a degree but which provided a kind of training that wasn't available in the kingdom and there was no reason, as we saw it at the time, to be mindful or doubtful about their bona fides.

I think another factor to keep in mind here was that Saudis paid their own way. They were not there on scholarship. You did not have this sense that they would be going in and looking for employment, unlawful employment, to support themselves.

Q: And the universities of course were delighted.

THIBAULT: They were delighted. Those who attended, there were many graduate students. Those who attended, the three or four thousand, either went there because their parents would have paid for it, as opposed to the government which paid for it or they were graduate students, post-graduate students, where the government did continue to pay because that kind of specialized training wasn't available in the kingdom. So I think this pattern, the background provides a context for the approach that the mission pursued and applied, in so far as issuing visas was concerned. This was very much in sync with Department-wide policy and with the policy of the Bureau of Consular Affairs. Now, of course, all of this came to a great change. Now I understand, and I have no first hand knowledge, that after my departure, which was in July of 2000 and then the year between that time and 9/11, there was a significant change in how the consular section operated. But, again, to put that in context, as I understand it, the changes that were made and particularly this so-called Visa Express program, were to try to get a handle on the huge numbers of people who were applying. As I said before, you had these long lineups.



And let me just mention that in addition to training, you had many, many, many, many Saudis who traveled there for personal reasons. There were direct flights between Jeddah and Orlando. So families would go on holiday. Many Saudis, wealthier ones, have properties, they would spend time in the United States. So for all of these, as I said, there was no waiver, they had to wait in line and wait like anyone else. So this was an attempt, this Visa Express program, presumably, was an attempt to sort of modernize that system and step up the flow of processing.

Q: You left there in 2000.

THIBAULT: I left in July, 2000.

Q: And what happened?

THIBAULT: Well, after a short leave I proceeded directly to New Delhi, India as DCM there as well. I had been DCM in Riyadh. I mentioned that my tour had just been extended to a third year as DCM, for a total of six. I had to seek special approval of a sixth year in country, because of the Department's policy of a maximum of five years. That had come through and then was in place and I was to spend that additional year and in fact I was told informally then that I'd probably become chief of mission in a neighboring Gulf country. I talked with the Department on that. Then when the assignment of the person who was to go as DCM to Delhi fell through, a complicated process, my name popped up because I had earlier bid on the job, a year or two before and of course I had extensive experience in the region. The ambassador there, Governor Dick Celeste, was keen to have someone who was knowledgeable about the country and had previous management experience. So he was keen to have me. Ambassador Fowler in Delhi knew how much an assignment to India meant to me. So the Department in Washington and others made it happen. I had said I was prepared to go but I've made a commitment to spend an additional year in Riyadh. If this is what the Department wants me to do, I will do it but I will not lobby to do it, to go there, because it did place the bureau, the NEA bureau, in a difficult position in May and June to find a DCM for Riyadh, which is an important post. I said, "If you want to make it happen, fine but I will not become actively engaged. I'm quite happy to remain where I am."

But in fact I did go to Delhi. I was there for three years. The first year as DCM for Ambassador Dick Celeste and then the last two years for Ambassador Bob Blackwill, so for a total of three years.

Q: Well, you got there in 2000. How would you describe the state of relations between India and the United States?



THIBAULT: Well, they were on an upturn and Ambassador Celeste deserves a great deal of credit for this because as recently as 1998 the Indians had exploded a nuclear device which caught the U.S. government with its proverbial pants down. The intelligence community was completely buffaloed by this development. They had not expected it. The Indians had played the positioning of our satellites that observed their test site and did a lot of preparation at night. In other words, operated in a way that concealed those preparations from our surveillance. I say this is nothing classified. This is well known. So it came as a great shock and of course was seen by the administration, the Clinton Administration, as a real slap in the face, particularly as they thought they had been assured by the new government led by Prime Minister Vajpayee that the government of India had no intention of exploding a device but yet it happened. So this was in 1998. Within two years President Clinton had made a state visit to India, a five day state visit, which was extremely successful. And a presidential visit, especially to a developing country, does not happen often or overnight.

As I said, the credit for the visit and for really doggedly influencing attitudes both in Delhi and in Washington, goes to Ambassador Celeste, who's a remarkable man, a three time governor of Ohio and former director of the Peace Corps. After college, he had spent three years as special assistant to Ambassador Chester Bowles, who's one of the icons of the U.S.-Indian historical relationship, in the late Sixties. He developed a love of India which has lasted to this day. I might note, just to round out his biographical picture, that he's presently the president of Colorado College in Colorado Springs. He obviously worked hard to persuade the Administration, or maybe he didn't work so hard, I don't know, to be appointed as ambassador to India but he was a wonderful choice, a man who has a great sense of policy and is an enormously likeable, outgoing person, a great manager for the embassy and an Ambassador who made it his mission to overcome the tremendous trough in the bilateral relationship. As I say, it was capped by a presidential visit, which occurred in March and I arrived in August.

So relations were on an upswing and as a result of that visit there was, of course, follow -up action and I was caught in that immediately because, within a day of my arrival in August, the ambassador went on leave and so I was caught up in preparations for the prime minister's visit to Washington, which occurred in the fall of 2000. We had a number of senior level visitors, coming and going in both directions, an enormous amount of preparation that the U.S. government, including the mission in India, was engaged in. So it was a good thing that I had some familiarity and awareness of India and had a background in it because it would have been much more difficult. So I got off on a very active and positive note and the prime minister's visit went extremely well. Very important to this process was the continuity that developed.



I say this because while we in New Delhi were in the throes of getting ready for the PM's visit and basking in the after-effects of the Clinton visit, at home we were in the final throes of the presidential campaign and of course President Bush was elected to his first term in the fall of 2000 and took office in January of 2001. The statements that candidate Bush had made on foreign policy, for the first time ever in a presidential campaign, included very positive references to India. Historically, most presidential candidates had simply ignored India or would make a passing mention of it with a number of other countries but in several statements Governor Bush particularly emphasized the commitment he was making and the importance he would place on building a new relationship with India. This caught a lot of people's attention in India and, as I say, it was very unusual. It meant that there was confidence as we proceeded with the transition into the first few months of the administration that the relationship would continue on a high note and that is, in fact, exactly what happened.

The credit for this, once again, comes down to personalities as much of the reason for this very positive approach by the new administration belonged to my second ambassador in Delhi, who was Ambassador Bob Blackwill. He had been a foreign policy advisor to Governor Bush as a candidate and would come down from Harvard, where he was a professor at the Kennedy School, to spend several days a week with Governor Bush traveling around the country. He drafted several of Bush's campaign speeches on foreign affairs or had an important hand in them and persuaded him that the time was ripe to make India a centerpiece of his approach to foreign policy. And, after the election, he was nominated to be ambassador to India. As I say, it made for very smooth continuity of policy and immediate engagement on the part of Indians, a predisposition on their part, the Vajpayee government, to further develop the good relationship with the United States. In other words, they worked hard to avoid poking their finger in our eye and to consider seriously new policy initiatives from the Bush Administration. And that is what happened.

Ambassador Celeste remained in Delhi through April of 2001 and I was charged<sup>1/2</sup> thereafter for several months 'til Ambassador Blackwill was confirmed and able to come out to New Delhi. But in that period of time, the administration, and again we're talking about the pre-9/11 period, May 2001, the administration unveiled new ideas about missile defense to which the Indians were among the very few countries to respond positively. This came as a great surprise to Washington, a very pleasant surprise for an important country like India to make positive statements like this at a time when there was so much criticism at home and abroad, especially from a country whose stereotype was that it would distance itself consciously from the U.S. While awaiting confirmation, the ambassador-designate, Bob Blackwill, spoke about the desire of the administration for a "transformation" of the bilateral relationship. This became a phrase, a mantra, that was his hallmark for the entire period during which I worked with him and in which he was ambassador. So it was a good experience to have that policy continuity.

Q: When was the last time you had been in India, now?



THIBAULT: I had been, I had left India in 1983. I passed through several times when in Nepal but had not spent any period of time.

Q: Did you sense, was there a new generation of Indian bureaucrats or maybe Indian thinking in universities? Was this really a new India in thought or

THIBAULT: It was a new India and I was astounded. It had been 17 years since I'd been there. Recall that I first went to India in 1968, so I've had 30 years of exposure to the country. It was an astounding, unbelievably different country. New Delhi alone, as a city, was far more vibrant and prosperous and interesting than I had recalled it. Attitudes, as you rightly suggest, were the key change. Attitude towards the U.S., I won't say Americans because Americans never had any problem in interacting with Indians, but with the U.S. as a sort of a concept. It was like night and day. You recall that when I was there in the early Eighties, our political counselor designate was blackballed by the Indian government because of the communist influence. The fall of the Soviet Union, the disappearance of the communist media which they were subsidizing were two factors. Much more important was the turnaround in their economy when they abandoned their socialist model of economic growth. And the emergence of a new generation across the board.

Q: It was mostly socialist and internalized.

THIBAULT: Yeah, it was a self-sufficient model, yeah. I mean, not entirely. We say socialist. The state was to be the guiding hand, so to speak but there was a very substantial private sector, don't get me wrong, but that was the Nehru philosophy. It had been sanctified by being associated with Nehru and his daughter, Mrs. Gandhi, continued with it. It began to change under Rajiv Gandhi, Mrs. Gandhi's son who himself was of the new generation. He was only forty when he became prime minister and then was tragically assassinated. Then a near economic collapse in 1991 and 1992 forced them to revise their policy and their overall thinking. The innate entrepreneurial talents and spirit of the Indian business community and of Indians generally immediately manifested themselves. They began to achieve a growth rate of six, seven, eight, nine per cent per year for many years, which continues to this day.



A younger generation - we could see this particularly in the bureaucracy. I had previously functioned as a domestic political officer. I dealt mostly with politicians and not so much with the bureaucracy in the early Eighties when I'd been there. But I certainly heard plenty about their attitude, the difficulty of working with them. They were proverbial, not just for those who had to deal with them but even globally. This time I was working with them on a day to day basis, across many ministries at pretty senior levels but working levels. They got the message, so to speak, that the government leadership wanted a positive relationship with the United States and they understood that they had to make it happen. And I developed some very good and close friendships with Indian officials in the foreign ministry and in other ministries as well. Throughout the three years I was there, I would be in their offices daily and we would also see them on a social basis as well.

So it was a totally different environment. Finally India had found its place in the global economy, particularly with its high tech capability. This was very important because, first of all, it meant a close relationship with the United States, which was the fountainhead of their technology, which was built on very close ties with many American companies, on the many Indians educated and working in the United States, some of whom came back and interacted in India. But secondly as a source of pride to the nation, overcoming this image of Calcutta and Mother Teresa and poverty-stricken India which was so prevalent in the Sixties and Seventies. The Indians had had a chip on their shoulder which represented a defensive attitude, almost an inferiority complex. The younger generation had none of that. Not that they were overbearing or moved to the other side of the spectrum. You could just deal with them on their own terms and on a positive and productive basis in which they were not counting their fingers after shaking your hand or second guessing what your real motives were. And then thirdly, that sector had grown up free of government control because it fell between the cracks. It was so new, the technology was so new it didn't fit within the usual footprints of government ministries. People drew a powerful lesson from this. It had grown because the government ignored it, and then it grew so rapidly and to such a size that if government tried to intervene there would be a tremendous pushback.

The attitude of the private sector, which had been very obsequious and very deferential to government, had completely reversed. They functioned as a modern interest group does here in the United States, attempting to inform the legislative process to their benefit, both at the individual corporate level and in associations as well. That was very important.

The fact that tens of thousands and maybe millions, today, of young, well educated English-speaking Indians can find good job opportunities in their own country, without having to emigrate, itself was a source of strength and pride as well and of self-satisfaction. So, yes, everything had changed, everything had changed.



Q: How about relations, in a way our military to military relations were good even during the bad times, weren't they?

THIBAULT: Well, you know that had always been a source of misgiving and complaint on the part of the Indians, that we always tilted towards Pakistan and that the U.S military instinctively felt more comfortable working with the Pakistanis. Indeed, the Pakistanis had been members of CENTO, which was the Central Treaty Organization, which existed in the Fifties and Sixties. They had allowed U.S. bases in Peshawar. The U-2 was based there. Then of course during the Afghan war we provided ... there was a turnaround in our attitude towards providing military equipment, F-16's, to Pakistan. The Indians, on the other hand, had a privileged relationship, including arms supply relationship, with the Soviet Union. All of that was part of the background, and the result was that the Pentagon, in particular, had no particular fondness for India. The mil-mil relationship was a very thin one. That began to change. This really began taking off under the Bush Administration and was particularly propelled by the intellectual and bureaucratic energy that was provided by Ambassador Blackwill.

Q: Talk a bit about Blackwill. I never interviewed anyone who served with him but the papers seem to allude to his managerial style and not in particularly glowing terms but I know nothing about it. Could you comment on working with him?

THIBAULT: He is without doubt the smartest and most brilliant, that's the word I would use, person I've ever worked with or for. Bob has a penetrating intellect which is applied to public policy issues. He is a student of diplomacy in the old fashioned sense of the word. On the coffee table in his office in Delhi he had various books by Kissinger which he almost knew by heart and would often quote verbatim, books full of pithy insight on the diplomatic-cum-bureaucratic and policy-making process. He is an acolyte of Henry Kissinger, was a key aide to him in the 70's, and has remained on very, very close terms with him. He sees himself as a Kissingerian, as do others as well. He was intimately involved with the evolution of U.S. policy towards the collapse of the Soviet Union, towards the reunification of Germany, was decorated by the German government for his role as a key aide to Secretary Baker. He often described himself as a Harvard don in his speeches in India, recognizing that there academic eminence trumped diplomatic background (a la Galbraith whom he also knew), but, in fact, for almost 25 years he was an FSO, rose to the rank of ambassador to the MBFR in Vienna. And during that time he was also political counselor in Tel Aviv at the time of the Camp David negotiations.



He has a phenomenal range of personal friendships and contacts both in Washington and throughout the Western Alliance. I say phenomenal and I mean that. He is policy oriented to his fingertips and I say that in the most positive way possible because for him it is not enough to have an analytical or intellectual understanding of an issue and of a possible course of action. The question he will instantly pose is very specifically, operationally, how do you affect and influence and change policy to achieve your desired objective. His understanding of how bureaucracy, our bureaucracy, works in Washington, the relationship of the National Security Council to the Defense Department, to the State Department, to the intelligence agencies and to other players is second to none, second to none. He enlisted his forceful personality and boundless energy to challenge, overcome, and shape ingrained positions about India generally, the accumulation of 40 years of dealing with a difficult country, and in particular, the orthodoxies of the non-proliferation theologians, but in other areas as well. He relished that. Quite simply, he is a remarkable man.

His association with President Bush as a campaign advisor, the fact that he had been Condi Rice's boss in the NSC in the late Eighties when Scowcroft was national security advisor, where he worked with Colin Powell, with all kinds of people whose names today are front and center in our own policy environment means that he knows everyone in the current administration. He knows how their minds work. He knows how they can be moved. He knows where they can't be moved. He knows how to get others to move them. He is a brilliant, brilliant person.

Beyond that, he has an energy level that I have never encountered before in anyone. He is a person who sleeps maybe three or four hours a day and has for many years. He gets up at about four o'clock in the morning and then immediately logs on and then just goes through a bunch of papers, both U.S. and foreign, overseas. By six he's ready to go. He's a Force of Nature, no question about it, no question about it.

Now you asked about his managerial style. He's extremely demanding; he just is. His standards are extremely high. He's always thinking ahead. He's a great communicator. Nothing is secretive with Bob Blackwill. You know what he's looking for, what his approach is, what his analysis is, what his objectives are, and it's constant, that way. He expects people to understand what the goal is and to support him in achieving that. Now, this goes down well with some and not so well with others. He can be very, he works 24/7. His expectation is that those who work with him will not necessarily share the same intensity of purpose, he understands that he's unique in his ability to get by with as little sleep, and that people have other things in their lives as well. That said, he demands a very high level of commitment and engagement. So conventional hours are not the norm, if you want to work with Bob; don't expect to do that. There's no question that there were some who didn't cotton to this approach.



Q: Did you find yourself, as some DCM's are, standing between this Force of Nature, as you put it and ordinary human beings who work within the embassy, to keep them productive and not getting bruised?

THIBAULT: Inevitably that's the case. That described my role, in effect. Absolutely, yes. I was managing the mission. Bob's focus was on the policy and the policy goals and the transformations that I mentioned before. This is not a lightly used word in his lexicon. Transformation means moving ahead and moving real change, not at the margins but substantive change, on difficult issues, on a wide range of fronts. That was all-consuming for him, so the day to day mission, if you will, was something that he expected me to take care of, while at the same time providing him needed support. He was looking for his DCM to achieve those goals. So it meant for me a very tough schedule, a grueling schedule, throughout those two years that I worked with him.

Q: During this time, because of 9/11, I'm thinking about Bangalore and others, these tech centers, was there concern on the embassy's and the ambassador's part about that we were giving up too much to the Indians?

THIBAULT: No, quite the contrary. We saw this as a win- win situation for both countries, as I continue to regard it as that. It added value to both sides, keeping in mind that the U.S. government had very little to do with any of it. These were corporate relationships that were established. The companies that operated in India and who came to operate in India did not consult us except on problems they might face and that was rare, didn't inform us. They were always cordial if we went down there but these were relationships that they had built and developed on their own. So whether we liked it or not was neither here nor there. I am sure that is very much the case now. Now you might have your own views as to where it might lead but at that time it was viewed as a very positive step. I should add here that I think that, I've noticed in the last two years, since I've come back and particularly in the last year that China and India are often mentioned in the same breath as formidable players in the evolving 21st century global economy and as you implied, over time, could pose some kind of, if not threat, at least challenge to us. I can't comment about China but I certainly think that's overblown with regard to India, at least for a long time to come. I think I'm second to none in my admiration for and affection for India but I also have, I believe, a clear understanding of their limitations and there are very, very, very considerable limitations. Their political process is complex and not conducive to clear-cut decisions. There are very severe limitations on infrastructure and in areas other than this high tech one that so much attention has focused on, which embraces really a very minute percentage of the population. They have a long way to go to overcome them and this is not easy to achieve, given their free wheeling and democratic political process because a lot of difficult choices have to be made.



Q: Because of the sheer size of the population. Well, how about, during the time you were there, how stood things between India and Pakistan in Kashmir and did we get involved in this?

THIBAULT: Let me just talk about, I'll come back to Pakistan but let me just make a comment, for the record here, on this transformation that we were talking about. We spent an enormous amount of time trying to develop a relationship on civil nuclear cooperation, on civil space cooperation, and on improving our mil-mil ties. We achieved a lot of success in the latter, that is the mil-mil relationship, and were less immediately successful in the first two, civil nuclear and civil space, because of entrenched opposition here in Washington, in the PM bureau in particular. Whether that's John Bolton or not, as some would allege, I have no idea but we had great difficulty in that regard. And it was not an issue that's easy to explain or where there are large constituencies involved, where you could find allies to do that. So when I emphasized Ambassador Blackwill's bureaucratic savvy, that doesn't mean he was successful in all regards. Yet a great deal of effort was expended in those areas. However, seen over the longer term, what Bob did achieve was to persuade most of official Washington of the benefit to the U.S. of a relationship with India in the emerging Asia of the 21st century, highlighting that trust could be established on the basis of shared values and with a rock-solid democratic partner. I believe we will yet see those agreements reached, especially on civil nuclear cooperation. .

The Pakistan relationship of course starts with Kashmir and that's been the case now for fifty or more years. There was a lot of ferment in Kashmir itself. There had been an insurgency that had continued for many years, beginning in the late Eighties and starting in the early Nineties, that led to tens of thousands of people being killed. The evidence was very clear that the source of this was in Pakistan itself, in which militants would have refuge on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control as it's called, on the Pakistani side in Kashmir and elsewhere in Pakistan, and with direct encouragement by the government of Pakistan, who would arm and equip them and then send them across the border to conduct mayhem. The Indians found that very difficult to counter. Part of it was because of some sympathy with the militants on the part of the Kashmiri population but also because of the nature of the terrain, which is very rugged, and then also because of the nature of the tactics that would be used to deal with them.



9/11 cast all of this in an entirely different light. Instead of talking about militants and insurgents, we talked about terrorists. 9/11 did several things. With the collapse of the Taliban and the attack on them and on al-Qaeda, of course the Pakistani bases of support for al-Qaeda became a major concern for the U.S. government. That in turn led to serious questions in Washington, which continue to this day, about what is going on in Pakistani society, in which fundamentalism has taken strong root and in which you have groups responsible for the murder of Daniel Pearl of the Wall Street Journal, for several attacks on President Musharraf attempting to assassinate him, an attack on an international church in which a number of Americans were killed in Islamabad, attacks on the U.S. consulate in Karachi, car bomb attacks, attacks on a group of French engineers, ten of whom were killed in Karachi also, frequent and deadly sectarian bombings. In other words, terrorism as a continuing phenomenon around the country. Then you have these groups operating in Kashmir and it became clear to us, at least viewed from the information we had in India, that they were part of the sub-culture of terrorism entrenched in Pakistan which made the use of terrorism an acceptable political tool. What was hard to accept was that the intelligence agencies in Pakistan that were targeting domestic terror groups and al-Qaeda, in response to U.S. pressure and in self-defense it has to be admitted, were at the same time supporting the terrorist groups operating in Kashmir, whom they typically equipped and trained. And the latter often had close ties to the groups that the GOP claimed to be trying to suppress in Pakistan itself that were such a danger to their internal order. The Islamic justification against infidels which motivated a lot of these young men was directed against India as much as against the U.S. and Saudi Arabia and other countries. So, as I say, 9/11 really gave us a different kind of insights into what was going on there.

And it became a subject of increasing importance in the U.S.-India relationship. If we're going to be talking about terrorists worldwide, the ambassador argued, we should be pointing to the terrorists, Islamic terrorists, operating against India. In December 2001 there was a suicide attack on the Indian parliament in New Delhi. They came this close an inch apart an inch apart, my fingers, of penetrating the door of the inner sanctum of the Indian parliament, the lower house of parliament, and they intended to murder, to assassinate as many parliamentarians as possible. There was a gun battle in which they were all killed and a number of security, Indian security folks, were killed as well. Instantly, in India and on the part of the government, the conviction sprang up that these were Pakistani recruited, trained and supported terrorists. The investigation, including examination of their mobile phone calls and whatever documentation they found on them added to that conviction. The belief was that the Pakistanis were determined to attack the very foundations of the Indian state. The way the Indians would put it to us, was just imagine you had a similar group trying to break into the U.S. Congress. Of course this did happen in 1947, with a group of Puerto Rican nationalists. And therefore the reaction was extremely strong.



This came in the wake, too, of an earlier meeting between Prime Minister Vajpayee and President Musharraf in Agra, prior to this attack, which had buoyed hopes of a breakthrough in relations but which if anything led to a downturn. The meeting was a total failure. So now you had the belief that the Pakistanis were really out to get the Indian state, if you will. Events began moving very quickly after that, after December 2001, through 2002, when there was a major buildup in Kashmir of Indian military personnel, all kinds of movements along the Indian-Pakistani border and growing signs the Indians might be prepared to attack Pakistan. This generated enormous concern in Washington and in our mission as well because, of course, you have both countries armed, having nuclear weapons and a delivery capability. The Pakistanis have been testing their missile delivery systems and the Indians have those capabilities too. It was believed and feared that a nuclear exchange was a very, very real possibility in that kind of climate.

The Indians began making increasingly insistent demands that the Pakistanis cease their support of the terrorist groups in Kashmir. This support and the climate of violence in Kashmir is very cyclical, very seasonal. During the winter, given the mountain terrain, there are heavy snows which cut off the passes that are used by infiltrators and so there's a sharp falloff in terrorist incidents. But then as the snows melt, beginning in May-June, the number begins to increase. So you have what are relatively objective measures of terrorist activity and a basis on which you can conclude that they are receiving support. The Indians, of course, claimed and would share with us information that included radio intercepts, the questioning of prisoners when they were traced and so forth to indicate that the evidence against Pakistani backing was clear and incontrovertible. So we watched, the whole U.S. government watched, this situation developing with growing alarm. The ambassador was exceptionally active. He's always active but if anything he was even more so.

Let me emphasize that his relationships with the leadership of the Vajpayee government were probably the closest that any ambassador has ever had, including those of Galbraith with Nehru in the early 60's. Part of his strategic focus is to identify and get to know well the people who count in government, meaning who can have some influence on the policy you're trying to work on or work with. And that others who fall outside that scope are not of much interest to you. Now, some might say well, an ambassador should devote a lot of attention to promoting commercial relationships, to cultural relationships, you name it. But that ambassador was focused on transformation and in this particular instance of crisis management the emphasis he had placed on cultivating key officials paid big dividends. We would meet with the national security advisor of the prime minister and senior officials involved in that policy almost on request, often daily or near daily, it was that close. So they had a very clear eyed understanding of Washington's views, of Washington's alarm, of our assessments, and of our insistence that they restrain themselves and that they make sure that there be no miscommunication or missignaling of their intentions. So this was a major focus.



I should add as well that we worked extremely closely with the British on this. In fact, Ambassador Blackwill's tenure was marked by the closest possible relationship between the U.S. and the British missions. Washington and London were like this and I link my fingers together here, in lockstep. So Powell and Straw, Colin Powell and Jack Straw, were in direct communication on a frequent basis. Of course the ambassador, who knew the national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, she had worked for him before, so they were in very frequent contact as well.

President Musharraf issued a statement that Pakistan was not supporting terrorists and would not support terrorists. Of course we tried to make the most of that statement with the Indians but they remained very suspicious and the way in which they measured this was by what they saw on the ground in Kashmir. They did not see these public statements translated into action on the ground. As the military preparations gathered steam and particularly as weather conditions in the late spring and early summer permitted military deployments more easily, people were very much focused on the fact that three previous Indo-Pak wars had been fought at that time of year. So things were coming to a head.

The ambassador, and again for all the criticism that some people make about his managerial style, was totally and absolutely and fundamentally focused on the security of our people, not just members of the official community and the mission but of American citizens in India. I want to emphasize that because we, meaning he, devoted an enormous amount of thought and time and dialogue with Washington on this issue and in ensuring that should war break out as few of our people would be in harm's way as possible, and therefore there was a need to make public statements alerting Americans to the grave danger that was building. These events culminated in a recommendation to the Department that the embassy be evacuated of all but essential personnel. This was the first time ever in the U.S.-India relationship and it was accepted by Washington. It was implemented within a few days, at the very end of May, coinciding, fortunately, with the end of the school year so it was minimally disruptive in real terms and with the normal transfer cycle as well. Within a few days all but a small number of people had left. I had been allowed to go on leave for a few days and was in South Carolina at the time and was called back by the ambassador, and I immediately returned. So we oversaw that evacuation and the British and many other embassies followed suit as well.

Q: Must have scared the hell out of everybody.



THIBAULT: I think it was viewed cynically by some the Indian media but I think it brought home to the government of India and to the Indian public just how seriously we viewed this crisis. So we observed this through June and well into July and we did begin seeing a tailing off of infiltration and finally the Indians began calling units back. You can only maintain this level of forward deployment and high alert for a limited period of time. So by August the situation had become a little bit more relaxed. The Indians announced elections in Kashmir which was something that Musharraf could use with his own people and the crisis eased. We were able to lift the evacuation and our people were able to come back within a relatively short period of time.

Q: Well, was the view from Delhi and our people that the Pakistani intelligence service was a loose cannon? In other words, was that under control of the president? To some extent, Pakistan was showing signs of being a failed state.

THIBAULT: Well, I don't accept the notion of Pakistan as a failed state, as someone who has spent some time there. I think our view was in fact the intelligence agencies were not rogue agencies but were reflecting the policy and the choices of the government of Pakistan, not necessarily in all of the operational details but in terms of the basic posture and in terms of the basic policy. The Pakistani Army is a very well-disciplined organization and always has been, which is one of the reasons why it's intervened as frequently as it has in domestic politics. So I don't think we accepted that notion.

Q: Was there, this attack, was it December of...

THIBAULT: December of 2001.

Q: Looking back to another thing, we were focused on al-Qaeda and the terrorists. Our president keeps reiterating, everything is terrorism and it stems from one source. According to somebody I was just interviewing, there was an attack in the Nineties on our airmen who were lodged in the Khobar Towers and the operation was an Iranian operation.

THIBAULT: Right, I was there at the time.

Q: We talked about this but there seemed to be a, I think you mentioned, there was an attempt to almost not overplay. This was taking our focus away, this was another source of terrorism and we had another policy. Was this coming up at all, because having Pakistani terrorists could dilute that focus?



THIBAUT: There was a conundrum for the administration, no question about it. On the one hand, we depended on the Pakistanis for their cooperation in going after al-Qaeda and there were a number of spectacular arrests that were made of al-Qaeda operatives, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, among others. Not to mention that in building up the Karzai government and creating a more friendly state in Afghanistan we needed Pakistani understanding and support for that as well, given their ability to really make that goal much more difficult to achieve if they weren't inclined to work with us. So our reporting and our very strongly expressed views, as expressed by Ambassador Blackwill, were not always welcome in Washington. He was extremely tough in his public remarks and he understood very, very clearly that an essential dimension of what we were trying to achieve in this transformation of the relationship was that it had to be publicly explained. So he was constantly working with the media and always accessible for interviews, for statements on television, seeking them out, giving public speeches, writing op-ed pieces. This was a major element of his diplomatic approach and style and he was pursued by the media wherever he traveled in the country for his comments and he never shrank from that. So he would make very, very forceful statements. As I said, one that comes to mind is, referring to these people operating across the border from Pakistan, that these were not "militants," they were not "insurgents," they were not "misguided youths," he would say, "Let us call them what they are. They are terrorists and they should be treated like terrorists and the United States government is committed to fighting terrorism and we apply that policy towards terrorism in Kashmir and wherever it happens."

Well this was a line that was not always welcomed in Islamabad. The Pakistanis viewed the people coming across the line of control as indigenous and the insurgency in Kashmir as having an indigenous character. They would dress it up in terms of people fighting for their freedom and "we support them, we sympathize with them, we provide moral support but nothing more than that." Of course, that was baloney. So it would create problems for our embassy, for our ambassador in Pakistan, because sometimes Blackwill's statements would be made at a time of delicacy in our U.S.-Pak relationship and his remarks would be highly publicized in Pakistan. As I say, it would create problems for us there. But this was not something on which Bob would back down, nor was he ever told by the Department or the White House to take a different line.

Q: What about our, after 9/11, our response, one, Afghanistan, two, Iraq? How did that play?



THIBAUT: Let me just mention, in terms of 9/11, the day of 9/11, I very well remember watching on CNN the attack going on, the plane crashing into the building, the towers and so forth. This was in the late afternoon, our time. As that was occurring, the ambassador received a phone call from the foreign minister, Jaswant Singh, in which he expressed the firmest and most positive support for the United States, to any degree and at whatever level and whatever way they could be helpful, they would be with us. And again, this was a very uncompromising, very swift, very instinctive response on their part and highly welcomed in Washington. There were no nuances to it, unlike some of the weasel words we might have gotten a few years beforehand. It testified to this strong relationship and this transformational process that was underway. This was all put to the test on the issue of Iraq. When it became clear that the administration was prepared to consider military action if Saddam Hussein did not implement UN Security Council resolutions, the question then arose as to where would the Indians be.

This was not only a theoretical or hypothetical question but a real one after the fighting war concluded followed by the occupation beginning in the spring of 2003. The administration was very keen on lining up as many other countries as possible to join us, particularly with, as they say, boots on the ground. In that regard we came very close to getting a large Indian contingent in Iraq. We were in very intense dialogue with them. Secretary Rumsfeld himself came out to Delhi, as did Gen. Shinseki, the Army Chief of Staff. The Indian defense minister also traveled to Washington for talks on this issue. The Indian army was institutionally disposed to dispatching up to a division, as I was well aware, dealing personally with several of the senior generals. During the war, at Blackwill's initiative, a mark of the new relationship as he put it, but with full endorsement from Washington, I undertook a formal briefing of the Indians, on a day by day basis, on military developments in Iraq, an unprecedented step on our part, drawing from all sources, including classified ones, to give them a sense of what was going on and to promote a serious dialogue between us. The Defense Department was extremely keen to get that presence in Iraq because the Indians, unlike some other nations, represent a serious fighting force. They've had plenty of experience, they're well regarded, and they have large numbers.

The Indian army was quite ready to go, quite prepared. They had identified the units that would be deployed and it seemed that it would happen. But as word of the dialogue between the two governments began leaking to the media, there was a counter reaction, particularly among the opposition parties and therefore in Parliament, expressing reservations about this. Not about the bilateral relationship but about this particular action and ultimately Prime Minister Vajpayee decided that he could not manage it. This would have been a departure from their previous fifty years of policy. He felt he could not break this kind of new ground unless he had a consensus, a national consensus, behind him and he finally opted out of it. It was a disappointment to us but we understood - this was a political decision that he alone could make.



Q: Did some aspects of the Bush Administration, while you were there, have repercussion with our relations with India? I'm thinking, we've tended to repudiate treaties and go it alone. These are oversimplifications but it was much more of a confrontational, almost nationalistic type of policy than what we had under previous presidents, and how did that translate because the Indians have always been great ones for multilateral things and all that.

THIBAULT: I've been talking about transformation of bilateral relations but you and I had earlier discussed the transformation of the India I had last encountered almost twenty years earlier. Very little of the Bush Administration's policies aroused a strong negative reaction on the part of the Indians, very little. I think that an important reason was the fact that, to some degree or another, they shared some of the views of the administration. But I believe the most important factor was that they were not going to allow themselves to be distracted from sharing in and pursuing the bilateral transformation that I was talking about. India sees itself as a different kind of country in the world. Unspoken in either our approach to India or in the Indian approach to the United States is the China factor. We all are looking at and wondering how China is going to evolve. What role will it play in the 21st Century? As a strategist, and one who knew China well from his years of teaching Chinese military officers under a special program at the Kennedy School and from regular trips to China, Bob Blackwill was keenly aware of China. Although he never spoke on this publicly, nor does the Administration, it was in this important context, as he saw it, that a strong U.S.-India relationship is vital for both countries, and I know this is how the Indians saw it as well.

India shares a very long border with China, fought a war with China back in 1963 which it lost. It sees itself now as having new technological prowess and strength as potentially a major player in the world economy. It wants to be taken seriously, especially by the United States. The Soviet Union is long gone. As you said earlier, a new generation has come to the fore. So they're committed to building the relationship with us. They may have had views about particular aspects of U.S. policy but they rarely allowed themselves to get wrapped up in that. Nor did the media, again part of this very surprising change in attitude. The leftist parties, which were very prominent when I was in Delhi in the early 80's, are fairly marginal in Indian politics today. There's a whole new generation in charge now which has gone beyond the thinking of earlier times. So, no, that's a long way of saying there was very little in U.S. policy that really prompted a negative reaction and certainly nothing similar to what we saw in Europe, for example, among our traditional allies. For example, arising over Iraq.

Q: It's interesting, for one might say that the Indians already had gotten over their anti-Americanism where the Europeans had been sitting around and for years under the thumb of the United States and getting tired of it. Here's a great chance to get out and venture annoyance without any particular repercussions.



THIBAULT: Right, and I think so much of dealing with the Indians, as is the case in Asia more broadly and the Middle East, is reflecting a respect for them. We have worked very, very hard to do that and deal with them as a major, serious country, which is how they view themselves. And to work hard to get our bureaucracy to buy into developing ways in which we can work together with India for mutual benefit. That is not easy. These all sound like pious platitudes but they really are not, they really are not.

Q: One of the things that I've had people talk about who have dealt with India in the past, India and Pakistan, was that whereas the Pakistani embassy seemed to know how to get out and glad hand its way around Congress and do the right thing, the Indian embassy, from the ambassador on down, seemed to be very concerned about their dignity and would only deal with people of a certain rank and all this, which essentially hindered them very badly in playing the Washington game. Has this changed?

THIBAULT: Well, of course, I was not in that great a position to observe their Washington operations but I certainly suspect it has changed. If anything, there's a complete reversal of views in official Washington, certainly on the Hill, towards Pakistan and India, particularly since 9/11. If there's one thing that we now devote a great deal of attention to is having shared values. Remember I said that for Saudi Arabia we had plenty of shared interests but no shared values, whereas with India we had relatively few shared interests but lots of shared values. Today we have lots of shared interests and shared values with India. We had a constant flow of members of Congress to India and it was very positive. You have the Indian-American community. I haven't talked about that but the Indian-American community is very large now, very influential, these are very successful people. You have a stake now at the political level, at the district level, for many members of Congress. You also have a business relationship which is very important, is growing very rapidly. So the threads that link us together are far more significant today and have far greater weight today than they did 15 or 20 years ago when the period you were mentioning existed, far more than with Pakistan, far more than with Pakistan. We're talking now of the president visiting India, he's made a commitment to do that. The Indian prime minister is expected here shortly, this summer. I'm not sure the embassies, here at least, play that key a role but they don't get in the way, either.

Q: You left there in ...

THIBAULT: I left there in July 2003 and I decided that I would retire at that point. I could have stayed on in the Foreign Service for another two or three years. By that time I'd been promoted to MC rank, minister counselor rank. Ambassadorial appointments that came up for the region that I was familiar with were given to others and I decided that there was no particular advantage to remaining in the Department and so I decided to retire, which I did in October '03. I had come home, and I took the job search program, and have been very happy since then.



Q: One thing you haven't mentioned, talking about Blackwill and going at 24/7, hours a day, seven days a week, what about family life for you?

THIUBAULT: My children were grown by the time I came to New Delhi in 2000. My oldest boy was already married and on his own, and my second son was also on his own. They both were leading their own lives and were and are very successful in what they do. My wife and I had been a team ever since we married. She was extremely active in the American Women's Association in Delhi, of which she was the president, and with the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce. Many of the things I was involved in we did together. I would be very active during the day and it was sort of a seamless flow into the evening and she would be there with me. She had been a full-time teacher at all of our previous posts at the local American school, including New Delhi in the early 80's. And she resumed that in Delhi when we returned, but more as a long-term substitute teacher. This gave her time to cultivate a very wide circle of friends, a great asset to me, I might add. She has known India as long as I have. We were married there, we had many, many friends. We felt completely at home in India. We had a great house. It was a wonderful assignment for both of us.

Q: Well, I want to thank you very much.

THIBAULT: It's been a pleasure.

End of interview